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Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati



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Bhakti Sadhana



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Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati

*Satsangs given at Paduka Darshan ashram, Munger, on the
occasion of Guru Poornima, from 4th to 6th July 2009*



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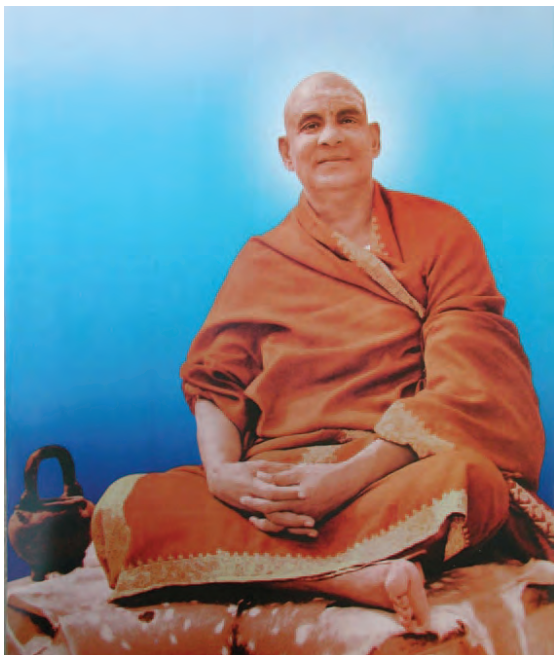
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Dedication

*In humility we offer this dedication to
Swami Sivananda Saraswati, who initiated
Swami Satyananda Saraswati into the secrets of yoga.*

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Swami Sivananda Saraswati: Crest Jewel of Bhakti

4 July 2009, Morning

Paramguru Swami Sivananda Saraswati lived the highest expression of bhakti. During the time he performed austerities on the banks of the Ganga, at Swargashram in Rishikesh, another sannyasin by the name of Swami Rajarajeshwarananda was living in a cottage nearby. Swami Rajarajeshwarananda was an ardent worshipper of Devi Ma, the Cosmic Mother. However, despite practising a rigorous sadhana of japa, meditation and pooja for twelve years, he did not find any signs of spiritual attainment or progress in himself.

The time for Durga pooja was drawing near and Swami Raja wished to worship Devi with silken clothes, adornments and other offerings. However, he did not have the money to do so.

On the day before *Navaratri*, the nine-day special period when the Devi is worshipped, there was a knock on his door. Upon answering, he found several Punjabi girls standing there, each bearing a plate with silken clothes, ornaments, money, fruit and all the various things needed for pooja. The girls said to Swami Raja, “Swami Sivananda sent us with all these things for you.”

Having previously expressed to Swami Sivananda his desire to worship the Mother with these items, Swami Raja thought Swami Sivananda had sent the desired materials. He readily accepted them and asked the girls, “To whom do these plates belong?” The girls replied, “To the *Anna Kshetra*, the alms house,” and went away.



A little later, Swami Raja went to Swami Sivananda's cottage and knocked on the door. When Swami Sivananda came out, Swami Raja asked him, "Who were those Punjabi girls?" Swami Sivananda said, "Which girls?" Swami Raja answered, "The ones you sent to me with the ornaments, clothes and all the things needed for the Navaratri pooja." Swami Sivananda said, "I did not send anyone." Swami Raja was very surprised. He went to the Anna Kshetra office, but did not find the girls there.

While recounting this incident many years later to the disciples of Swami Sivananda, Swami Raja said, "I had been practising *tapasya*, austerities, for many years so as to be blessed with a vision of Devi. Swami Sivananda did not practise any prescribed Devi sadhana, yet it was due to Swami Sivananda's prayers alone that Devi gave me darshan in the form of those girls."

It is true that Swami Sivananda did not undertake a formal ritualistic worship of Devi Ma. He acknowledged this fact himself during a visit to the ashram by a great scholar from South India. Upon seeing the prosperity of the ashram,

the scholar noted that Swami Sivananda's success in all that he undertook was surely the fruit of his worship of Tripura Sundari. Swami Sivananda replied, "I have never worshipped Tripura Sundari in the formal ritualistic way. Yes, in the morning after a bath I do chant a few Devi mantras, and whenever I see a woman, I bow to her mentally and chant *Om Sri Durgayai namah* or some other Devi mantra. For me, every woman is Devi Ma herself in a living, breathing form. This is my Sri Vidya upasana."

Swami Sivananda's bhakti was of a very high calibre. He was not limited to any one name or form of the Lord; he simply saw the omnipresent God in every creature. He taught that worship and prayer should not be confined only to the temple. He believed that while ritual worship in the temple was necessary as primary education, the final culmination of such worship should be to conduct oneself in the world as if one were in a temple and behave towards all creatures as if one were in the presence of God Himself.

Swami Sivananda had internalized *vibhooti yoga*, 'yoga of divine glories', described in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Everything reminded him of God. Whenever he came out of his room and saw the Ganga and the Himalayas, he remembered Sri Krishna, for in the *Bhagavad Gita* Sri Krishna says, "Amongst rivers, I am the Ganga and amongst the immovables, I am the Himalayas." The sun, moon, planets, constellations, plants, trees, rivers, mountains, the brawny wrestler, the nimble-witted student: all are the manifestations of the glory of God. In all of them Swami Sivananda perceived the presence of divine energy, to the extent that even in his spectacles and shoes, the mundane items of daily use, he maintained the awareness of God's presence. He would handle his spectacles and fountain pen as if picking up a newborn baby. He would shut the case very gently after returning the spectacles to it. Perhaps it was for this reason that Swami Sivananda never broke anything in his entire life. Even when he unfurled and draped a shawl around himself, it was with such gentleness and innocence, lest he hurt the God immanent in the shawl in any way.

Once, Swami Sivananda was sitting in the ashram office and asked a sadhaka to sing a song. The sadhaka began to sing. Swami Sivananda told the devotees seated around, “See, this office is like a bazaar. People are chatting to each other, a song is being sung and the typewriter is making noise. However, in reality, every single thing is God. There is nothing to give up and nothing to gain. Just experience that everything is God, and nothing else. The song is God, the devotee is also God, the typist is God too; each and every object and person is God.” Swami Sivananda was the crest jewel of bhakti.



Bhakti: An Art of Living

4 July 2009, Morning

People believe that bhakti is a sadhana through which God, the transcendental power, may be realized. They believe that it is a technique by which closeness to God may be achieved, a method by which one can know the God within. There are many beliefs about bhakti; however, bhakti is a lifestyle, an art of living, and nothing else.

The story of bhakti

Bhakti first starts with understanding the conditions of human existence. The nature of human mind is tamasic. This tamasic mind is one that is constantly under the influence of aversion, jealousy, envy, anger, greed and arrogance. As long as these emotions are expressed in life, the mind remains agitated and tamasic. Hatred, greed, anger are all tamasic expressions of the mind. It is in this tamasic state that you experience the fleeting joys and sorrows of life, and it is by overcoming these conditions that you can attain happiness, peace and prosperity.

Sometimes, worship of God is motivated by tamasic thoughts, sometimes by sattwic thoughts, and at other times by rajasic thoughts. Regardless of whether tamas, rajas or sattwa inspire you, you are entitled to pray and practise worship. Tamasic or rajasic worship is not erroneous or wrong; however, this type of worship is not the complete description of bhakti.

In bhakti, through the connection between the devotee and God, the devotee experiences luminosity and sattwa, and becomes established in a positive frame of mind. Bhakti is the perfected end, the final attainment of a sattwic lifestyle. Conversely, self-indulgence is the result of a tamasic lifestyle. With this understanding, bhakti becomes a unique sadhana and process of upliftment.

Our rishis, munis and saints have said that if you wish to uplift your life, you will eventually have to follow the path of bhakti. Samadhi does not improve life; it is the highest experience in life. The experience of samadhi does not last. As long as the eyes are closed, you are engrossed in the blissful state of samadhi and meditation, yet the moment the eyes open, your thoughts turn towards the objective world, and the mind associates with the material world. Your extroverted mind causes an obstruction in the continuous flow of inner awareness. When this obstruction arises in the continuous flow of awareness, how can you experience bhakti?

People consider worship to be a form of bhakti. That is true; however, bhakti is also a lifestyle. It is a science of the mind that can liberate one from the negative, tamasic conditioning. Bhakti can establish one in a sattwic state to enable one to experience the connection between the *atma*, soul, and *Paramatma*, the Supreme Soul. This is the story of bhakti.

There are two influences in life: maya and bhakti. In the tamasic state you remain influenced by maya, illusion, and in the sattwic state, you are under the influence of bhakti. Under the influence of maya, you forget your real nature and distance yourself from peace; whereas when influenced by bhakti, you experience contentment and peace, no matter how worried and stressed you may be.

To go beyond the tamasic state, you have to connect your mind and emotions with God. However, who or what is this entity called 'God' with whom you have to connect your mind and establish your faith in? The answer is given in the Vedas.

Essence of God

God lives in the form of a luminous flame inside the heart of every being. At the time when there was nothing, only a flame existed, which was pure consciousness: *chaitanya jyoti*. That flame never goes out, and even after all other lights have dissolved, that flame remains self-luminous.

When there was no creation, no life, no creatures, no planets or constellations, when there was nothing, in the void there was darkness that spread in all directions, and space was still. In that nothingness permeated with darkness, a flame manifested spontaneously, and it is that flame of consciousness, *chaitanya jyoti*, which has been called *devata*, the luminous one. Devata is a form of the *chaitanya jyoti*. The word ‘devata’ is derived from the root *div*, meaning ‘to be illumined’. That illumined one, that devata, is the first manifest form in creation.

God’s form of *Satyam-Shivam-Sundaram*, truth-auspiciousness-beauty, is what a devotee calls devata. Who is this devata? Many different names have been given to it. Someone who had a vision of this devata, who was a witness to this experience, named it Sadashiva. Another person called it



Parameshwara. Whether we call it Sadashiva, Parameshwara, Purushottam or Ishwara, its original, essential form is chaitanya jyoti.

The chaitanya jyoti contains truth, beauty and auspiciousness. For this reason, the first form of devata, Sadashiva or Parameshwara, has been known as *sat swarupa*, the essential form of truth; *Shiva swarupa*, the essential form of auspiciousness; and *saundarya swarupa*, the essential form of beauty: Satyam-Shivam-Sundaram. It has no form or body of its own; it is the totality of all possible attributes and expressions. Everything is immanent and inherent in it. It does not have a manifest form; it is unmanifest. In the unmanifest, formless dimension, it is truth, auspiciousness and beauty. Through this chaitanya jyoti, the world manifests, develops and expands.

That which is *sat*, true, is the cause for the expansion and development of creation. Therefore, it has also been called *chit*, or consciousness. That truth is not realized in sorrow, but in joy and bliss; thus, *ananda*, or bliss, is its third form. Therefore, that *param tattwa*, supreme element, is also known as Sat-Chit-Ananda. That which is true, experienced as bliss, and the truth through which creation develops in the form of consciousness, is *Satchidananda*. That is Satyam-Shivam-Sundaram. That is Father of the world. That is Mother of the world, and from this the cosmos and creation have come forth.

Expressions of the cosmic consciousness

The five elements of earth, water, fire, air and space are the expressions of the supreme element. The five elements are the five bodies of that supreme consciousness through which it expresses itself in the world. Where could the experience of God be felt if indeed it were felt? In space, air, fire, water and earth. The earth is God, water is God, fire is God, wind is God and space is God. These five elements are forms of God through which the entire creation is created and sustained. You are the result of that. Your body is also created out of these five elements, and God is present in your body.

The five elements are the body of God, and maya is His innate power. It is like the body and its strength. Strength is innate; it remains hidden in the body. Similarly, God also has innate strength and energy that remains hidden in Him. This innate energy or *shakti* is called maya, the power of manifest creation and projection.

Tangible, subtle and causal forms of God

The scriptures say that the entire visible universe is the cosmic form of *Paramatma*, Supreme Soul. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna had a vision of the cosmic form. Within this form, he saw all the galaxies, all the creatures and living beings, all the mountains and rivers, the sun, the moon, and all the planets and constellations. Whatever has manifested out of the unmanifest, all that is seen, the entire experience of creation, is *virat swarupa*, the cosmic form of God.

Whatever you experience in life is through the mind, intellect or emotions, through the agency of its inner instruments. These inner instruments, or *antahkarana*, constitute the *hiranyagarbha swarupa*, the ‘golden womb’ form of God. The *virat swarupa*, the cosmic form includes you, me, the earth, sun, moon, planets, constellations: the entire cosmos. This is the gross, tangible form of *Paramatma*. The director of the subtle, intangible form, containing the mind, intellect, emotions, ego, senses and desires, is the *hiranyagarbha swarupa*.

The third form of *Paramatma* is *ishwara swarupa*. First comes *virat swarupa*, which is gross and tangible; the second is *hiranyagarbha swarupa*, which is subtle and intangible; and the third is *ishwara swarupa*, which is present in a causal form in every creature and every speck of creation. God is in every single seed and particle of dust. That which is present within every individual in a causal, potential and seed form, is called *ishwara swarupa*.

If you open up the seed of a tree, you will not see the tree or its leaves, trunk and flowers, yet they are all present in the seed in a causal form. To be present in the causal state means



the inherent possibility of growth and progress. This presence of possibility in the seed state is called 'Ishwara'. The potential and possibility was present yesterday, is present today, and will be present tomorrow as well. Ishwara is a causal possibility, just as there is the possibility of a harvest within a seed. If you plant a seed six months after buying it, it will germinate. Even if you plant it the next season, it will still germinate. The possibility of growth is innate in that seed, the godhood of possibility, *ishwaratwa*, lies hidden within that seed. That is also the cause of the growth of that seed. Since this third form of God, this potentiality, is present everywhere and in everything, Ishwara became another name meaning 'God'. Parameshwara, Paramatma, Ishwara: they are all interchangeable and refer to the one supreme element, God.

Three forms of God

God also has three operational forms: Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. These do not differ from each other, although they have been explained and portrayed as such from the perspectives of worship and religion. Look at your own life. Are you a child, a parent or a grandparent? To one person

you are a child, to another you are a parent, and to someone else you are a grandparent. Despite having many roles to play, you essentially remain a human being. Your son does not call you 'brother' but 'father'. Your wife does not call you 'child' but 'husband'. Your wife is also a sister to someone and a mother to someone else. In every situation, her function changes. In her role as a wife, her duty is different, and as a mother it is different again. In only one individual many qualities, attributes, roles and duties are seen.

In the same manner, God's Brahma aspect is the manifest form of His creative talent. When you make a vessel from clay, the changed aspect of clay is seen in the vessel. To the one who made the vessel, you give the title 'potter'. Similarly, people call the one who made the universe 'Brahma'. The one who nourished this universe is called 'Vishnu', and the one who brought change is known as 'Shiva'. Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh are the three forms of God that bring about the development of this world. In the form of Brahma, God brings about creation; in the form of Vishnu, God maintains and sustains; and in the form of Shiva, Mahesh or Rudra, the same God brings about transformation. I use the word 'transformation' here, meaning a new development. When something new is discovered, the old has to end. Thus, Shiva as the energy of transformation, Vishnu as the energy of sustenance, and Brahma as the energy of creation are the three manifest forms of that unmanifest, eternal, infinite Parameshwara, through which He becomes capable of enacting His will. The one element of God has three different functions. For this reason, God is portrayed in the three forms, which have been presented in different ways by the scriptures, religions and various schools of worship.

Five activities of God

The Supreme Soul is virat, hiranyagarbha and Ishwara: gross, subtle and causal. This eternal and infinite entity has five functions to perform. The first function is creation, the second function is sustenance and the third function is

change. The fourth function is *tirobhava* or *tirodhana*, which means to delude the mind. Deluding the mind means that maya has free rein to do as she wishes with an individual; if she wishes to make a fool of him, she may. If she wishes to lead the mind astray, she may. When ignorance veils knowledge, the light of wisdom remains unseen. The veil of ignorance covers the light of that knowledge. That veil is maya. This is tirobhava, the fourth function of Paramatma.

Creation has happened, it is being nurtured and maintained, and constant changes are taking place in it. In the fourth function of tirobhava, the mind becomes deluded by the gross world, loses its discrimination and natural wisdom, and becomes engrossed in the world. This is a state of *tamas*. To become engrossed is to forget your own self. You have forgotten that 'You are that', that Supreme Spirit. Your perspective of yourself and the world is coloured by the spectacles you have put on your eyes. You perceive neither the reality nor your own true nature. This is tirobhava.

The fifth function of Paramatma is *anugraha*, grace. Grace brings the individual back to the path of growth. There is maya in tirobhava, and bhakti in grace. Here, the two aspects of maya and bhakti are seen. When the mind is deluded, you



are under the spell of maya, and you lose your discrimination. The intelligence becomes limited and narrow, and is attracted toward the objects of the world. The attention goes to the world of the senses and sense objects as that is what you are attracted towards, and pleasure and fleeting happiness are experienced in this attraction. That is maya. Grace is bhakti. The recipient of God's grace experiences positive changes within, which connect you to God and enable the descent of God in your life. It is due to grace that bhakti is attained. Thus, creation, sustenance, transformation, delusion and grace are the five functions of God.

Six attributes of God

God has six characteristics or qualities. The first quality is *jnana*, knowledge or wisdom. God is the witness of everything; He watches everyone. He never loses Himself in the world. *Prakriti*, Nature, does all the work. Maya makes the whole world dance. God merely watches with the attitude of a witness. Just as a guardian watches children play with a non-participatory, witnessing attitude, similarly, God watches *Prakriti* at work. Since He is an observer, He possesses knowledge. Therefore, *jnana* is God's first attribute.

The second quality of God is *aishwarya*; He is the source of all prosperity. In this entire universe, God bestows whatever wealth or glory one acquires.

The third characteristic of God is *vairagya*, non-attachment. To no one is God attached; He does not like anyone more or less than the other. Just as the sun's light falls equally on all places in the world, so does God's light; everyone receives wisdom, love and prosperity equally. Imagine that you have six children at home. If you can see all six with an impartial eye, treat them all equally and not be partial to any one of them, then you too possess *vairagya*. Everyone is equal in the eyes of God. If He is distributing toffees, one by one He will give them to everyone so all receive equally. If He gives ten toffees to one, He will also give ten toffees to another. He never discriminates in any way,

and never is He attached to anyone. Partiality occurs when one sways between attachment and detachment; however, one whose sight is equal, who has no attachment, possesses *vairagya*.

God's fourth attribute is *bala* and *samarthya*, strength and capability. He is capable of doing everything; there is nothing in the world He cannot do. He inspires everyone.

God's fifth quality is *sampatti*, *samriddhi* and *dhana*, wealth, prosperity and riches, through which an individual becomes free from lack in life.

God's sixth attribute is *yasha* and *kirti*, success and glory, which indicate attainments and successes in life.

Wisdom, non-attachment, prosperity, strength, wealth and glory are the six qualities of God. He is also the controller of four attributes that the individual being possesses: the senses, the *pranas* or the vital energies, the body, and the mind.

God's abode

The scriptures say that God resides in the hearts of all beings. The heart is the body's most hard-working and muscular organ. If the eyes stop working, life will continue. Similarly, if the ears, hands, legs, stomach or brain stop working, life will go on; however, if the heart stops working, right then and there it is the end of life. God dwells in just this place, which is the most vital part of the body. He dwells in the heart in the form of a *jyoti*, a flame.

The Supreme Spirit, God, is in you and you are in Him. Every person is a part of God and God is a part of every person. Your genes contain those of your father, so from a certain viewpoint your father is in you and you are in your father, since both of you share the same genes. Similarly, God is in you and you are in God. He is the original Father, of you, of me, of everyone. Everyone has the same genes. You will ask, then why the differences? The answer is simple. Differences arise due to *tirobhava*, delusion, and *maya*, illusion.

In one person's life, the covering of *maya* may be as thin and transparent as plastic, while in another person's life it

may be as thick as a blanket or quilt. When the cover of maya is as thick as a quilt, how much light can shine through? When the veil of maya is as transparent as plastic, the cover will remain, yet light will shine through it. The veil of maya creates division between people. If you remove this veil, all differences end. If all differences end, only bhakti remains, nothing else.

Two symbols of God

In the context of worship, there are two symbols of God: *sakara*, with form, and *nirakara*, the formless, the abstract. God permeates this world; He is present in every molecule and atom, and the entire world is contained within Him. This is the abstract, formless aspect, or *nirakara swarupa* of God. When one is born in a form, one cannot know the formless. To realize the formless, a tangible manifestation of the formless is necessary. Who, after all, has experienced the *nirakara*?

In the *Ishavasya Upanishad* it has been said that Isha is the indweller of the whole world (v. 1):

*Om isha vaasyamidam sarvam yatkincha jagatyaam jagat;
Tena tyaktena bhunjeethaa ma gridhah kasyasvid dhanam.*

All this, whatsoever moves in this universe, is indwelled by Isha: therefore, through renunciation do thou enjoy, and do not covet anybody's wealth.

In various other Upanishads also, it is said, "See the presence of God all around you. Why do you seek God in the cosmos? Look at yourself. You will be able to experience Him because He is in you; the entire universe is His dwelling place." The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* states (5:11):

*Eko devah sarvabhooteshu goodhah. Sarvavyaapee
sarvabhootaantaraatmaa.*

Devata is one. He is innate, hidden in every being. All pervasive, He is the soul seated in every being.

Karmaadhyakshah sarvabhootaadhivaasah. Saakshee chetaa kevalo nirgunascha.

He is the director of all *karmas* or actions and He lives in all beings. He is the witness of everything and is free from all attributes and qualities.

This is the nirakara, or formless aspect of God.

When an individual being enters this world, how is it possible to know the nirakara, the formless? One's intellect has been coloured by *maya*. Indeed, *maya* has not only baffled one poor creature, but has confounded the whole world. Therefore, when an individual is born, the conditioning it receives from the parents and society is based on a deluded reality, *bhramit samskara*. It is created by the intellect or motivated by self-oriented aspirations and desires. In this way, one receives material *samskaras*, and then to fulfil these material conditionings, one prays to God.

The *Bhagavad Gita* says that there are four kinds of devotees: *arta*, *artharthi*, *jignasu* and *jnani*. The formless aspect can be understood by the *jnani*, and the *jignasu* can make an effort to understand it; while the concrete form is useful to the *arta* and the *artharthi*. An *arta* is one whose life is sorrowful, who is looking for a crutch, for support in life, who is trying to fill the emptiness felt in life, and an *artharthi* is one who worships for the fulfilment of a specific objective or purpose. The *artharthi* will always worship the *sakara*, the form, the concrete aspect. Thus, the *jnani* and the *jignasu* experience the *nirakara* and understand its existence, while the *arta* and the *artharthi* worship the *sakara*.

All creatures born in the world are *artas* and *artharthis*. You are an *arta*; there is pain and sorrow in your life and you desire to be free of them. You are an *artharthi*; there are shortcomings in your life that you want to overcome. In such situations, you need to centre the mind on a form. However, one who introspects, who tries to become worthy of God rather than manipulating external circumstances so they become favourable, is a *jignasu*, a *jnani*.

Where does God live?

Emperor Akbar once asked the members of his court a question, which no one could answer. Akbar then summoned his wise minister, Birbal, and said, "I want the answer to my questions. My first question is, 'Where does God live?'" Birbal answered, "Your Highness, God is all-pervasive. He has no place of His own, but devotees see God in their own hearts. God is omnipresent; He lives in all places, but devotees see God in their hearts. Therefore we must accept that God lives in the hearts of devotees."

Akbar said, "Birbal, your answer is accepted. My second question is, 'What does God do?'" Birbal replied, "Maharaja, I need to sit on a high seat to answer this question. You are the seeker; therefore, you should sit on the ground to listen to the answer to your question." Akbar said, "All right." He seated Birbal on the throne and sat himself down at Birbal's feet and asked again, "Now tell me, what does God do?" Birbal said, "Your Highness, God brings down those who live high and elevates those who live low. You were sitting high; God made you sit low. I was at first standing low; now God has seated me on your throne. This is what God does. God never gives constancy. Continuous change and transformation is God's work."

Akbar asked, "All right, now tell me, what does God eat? The laddoos, bananas and other food offered to God, is this all He eats?" Birbal replied, "No, Maharaja. God does not even look at the laddoos, food, fruit or flowers you offer; only the priests consume them. Instead, God eats man's ego. As long as a person is egoistic, closeness to God cannot be attained. The day that freedom from the ego is attained, God will be experienced spontaneously. That is why God feeds on the ego and not on laddoos, pedas, coconuts and the various foods offered to him."

Akbar said, "Birbal, now the fourth question. Hindus say that God incarnates as an avatara and comes to the earth Himself, whereas we believe that Allah does not need to come Himself. He can command anyone. On His command,

messiahs come down to earth to bring the message of the Almighty. Hindus say Ishwara manifests in a form to dispel all sorrows and eradicate evil. Why does He come Himself?" Birbal said, "Maharaja, to answer this I need a day's time."

This question is on avatars. Why does an avatara happen? In the *Bhagavad Gita*, it is said that an avatara manifests to establish *dharma*, a righteous, natural order, to destroy the wicked and to delight the hearts of good people and saints. In Akbar's mind lurked doubt, 'If God is all-powerful, then why does He have to appear Himself?'

Birbal asked for a day's time and went to the place where Akbar's little son was playing with his nanny. He told the nanny, "In the evening, when Emperor Akbar strolls in the garden and comes close to the lake, you must throw a wooden doll into the water and raise the alarm that his son, the little prince, is drowning." After saying this, Birbal went away.

In the evening when both Akbar and Birbal came to the garden for a stroll, the nanny threw the wooden doll into the lake, as instructed, and raised the alarm that the prince had fallen into the water. As the noise reached Akbar's ears, he ran to the spot and, looking neither right nor left, jumped straight into the water to save his child.

When he found that it was merely a wooden doll, he asked Birbal what this was all about. Birbal replied, "Maharaja, you have so many servants. There are so many courtiers walking with you. Why did you not tell someone to jump in and save the child? You could have told any of the courtiers or guards that the child had fallen into the water and that they must save him. What need was there for you to have jumped into the water yourself?"

Akbar said, "Birbal, you don't understand. I am his father; he is my son. I have the sentiment of love, of 'mine-ness'. Why should I tell the guards to go and save my son when I can save him myself?"

Birbal said, "Maharaja, you have answered the fourth question yourself. God comes down to earth because of love,



the feeling of mine-ness. He knows, ‘This person needs me, he is thinking of me.’ Love and oneness are the reasons God comes and it is this that inspires Him to take on a human form.”

Need for a form

Akbar said, “All right, I accept what you have told me. Now tell me, how do you bind the eternal, undefined, infinite God to a finite form? We believe that the Almighty has no face, that He is beyond the range of thought, that he is latent and has no form; whereas you Hindus have idols, be it Rama, Krishna, Shiva or Vishnu. What is the need for all these?”

Birbal said, “Maharaja, let us do one thing. Tell the courtiers to spit on the picture of your father that hangs in the hall.” Enraged, Akbar said, “How dare you say such a thing?” Birbal replied, “Maharaja, that is only a lifeless picture, isn’t it? Made of cloth and paint. Who would have any problem spitting on it? If you say so, I will do it myself.”

To this, Akbar roared, “Birbal, don’t you dare! Do you not know that is the painting of my father?” Birbal explained to the enraged emperor, “Maharaja, the painting is inanimate; however, when you see it, an emotion and sentiment arises in your heart. You cannot spit on the picture of your father, as the sentiment in your heart connects you to it. Similarly, when a devotee worships an idol he sees his *aradhya*, his Beloved, his God in it. The idol is only a symbol and nothing more. For a *bhakta*, a devotee, an image is essential, as only through this will he be able to express his sentiments of faith, trust and devotion towards God. When you see the picture of your father, what do you feel?” Akbar said, “Respect, love, devotion and closeness.” Birbal responded, “Maharaja, just as an inanimate painting evokes feelings of love and respect in your mind, the feelings in a devotee’s heart and mind at the time of worship please God.”

Just as the body is composed of the five elements, an idol is also composed of five elements. The idol remains an idol; however, the worship of the idol goes to God. For example, when you shake hands with a person, just by that simple act, the other person is gladdened. You only shook hands, yet the person is pleased. Similarly, you worship the symbol, yet you delight the one who you are really worshipping. Whatever you offer in worship or prayer always goes to God, not to the idol. Just as a girl playing with a doll is able to awaken in herself maternal feelings towards the doll, similarly a devotee worshipping an idol with a one-pointed mind is able to awaken *bhakti bhavana*, the feelings of devotion, within.

The foundation of Indian philosophy has been image or idol worship, for which the culture has fought many battles. There have been many invasions, and idol worship was forbidden several times. However, the Indian people said, “How can we stop idol worship? It is due to this that trust and faith thrive in our lives. It is through this that we are able to establish a relationship with God in our lives. How can this be stopped?”

Bhakti or devotion can be awakened through connection with the sakara, manifest form. The goal of worship is to lose yourself in your object of devotion. Until the mind finds a base, how can it become one-pointed? When you meditate, you focus your attention on the breath. If you do not fix your attention on the breath, the mind will wander. To keep the mind steady, you fix your attention on the breath, body, symbol or mantra. This creates a base to engage your mind on one point, to keep it steady and connected. That support or base is sakara.

In the worship of the sakara, a devotee sees the Beloved alive in that symbol. For a devotee, a symbol is not merely a symbol; rather, it is a channel for the expression of the emotions, and since it is an expression of emotions, the symbol represents a living experience. In the same manner that you feel love and respect when you see the picture of your father or guru, when a devotee sees the symbol of the Beloved, the sentiments of love, devotion, trust and surrender are felt towards it. The worship of sakara is necessary for this feeling and emotion to rise, and for the evolution of spiritual life.

Purpose of bhakti

It is every individual's natural drive to search for happiness. You want happiness in your personal, domestic and social life. Happiness or bliss is also believed to be a human being's intrinsic nature. If you were told that your true nature is bliss, you would think, 'Swamiji is talking philosophy.' However, when you are searching for happiness in your life, family, job, occupation, and society, why are you doing it? When you experience happiness, you also feel joy and a sense of contentment and fullness, *poornata*, in your life. Everyone attempts to find happiness in order to experience this senses of fullness.

What is the centre of ananda, bliss? How can one go to the centre of ananda, so there is joy in life? What is the path to reach happiness? Is a guru needed in this process? The

scriptures say that only in the complete, the full, the whole, is there happiness and joy. There is no joy in the incomplete, the less than full, or the fragmented. There is joy and bliss only in that which is full; that which is not whole causes sorrow. Bliss is eternal; sorrow is short and momentary. Worldly people say joy is momentary, and sorrow is eternal; however, the scriptures say that sorrow is momentary, while bliss is eternal.

The reason for your sorrow is the limited, narrow mind, due to which you consider unhappiness to be a fixed part of life and happiness to be a visitor for a short while; sorrow a companion for life and joy a fleeting visitor. However, the scriptures say that sorrow is fleeting and bliss eternal. If people connect themselves to joy or bliss, sorrow is not felt, and if they connect themselves to sorrow then bliss will not be felt.

Pour water into a glass and ask the question, “What is there in the glass?” People will either say the glass is half-full or the glass is half-empty. The ones who say the glass is half-empty are noticing the emptiness in the glass. The ones who say that it is half-full are looking not at the emptiness, but the fullness of the glass. You always look at the lack in your life, “I don’t have this, I don’t have that.”

People always look at the lack in their lives. However, if the feeling of satisfaction and contentment arises for having received the water, even if it is half-full, then the attention never goes towards the emptiness. Instead, you will see the achievement, the gain. There is both joy and sorrow in the world, and the devotee believes sorrow to be momentary and joy to be eternal. It is the hallmark of a *sadhaka*, spiritual aspirant, to scorn the illusion of worldly riches and not run after the senses and sense objects, not go crazy over them, not get attracted to them, or connect to them. Instead, lasting bliss in the light of God’s name is desired and sought. Living in the light of God’s name is the state of bhakti. Thus, the simple definition of bhakti is: believing the world to be fleeting, and striving to live in the light of God.

Prerequisites of Bhakti

4 July 2009, Afternoon

There are four kinds of devotees in the world: arta, artharthi, jignasu and jnani. The jignasu and jnani feel the all-pervading presence of God in life, and their prayers are based on that experience. Beset by the problems and conflicts in life, the arta and artharthi devotees pray to God to remove their sufferings, difficulties and problems so that they may lead a happy and stress-free life. The scriptures have prescribed *sakara upasana*, worship of a concrete form, for the arta and the artharthi, and *nirakara upasana*, worship of the formless, for the jignasu and the jnani. Both have a different relationship with God. God is given a definite form in sakara upasana, whereas in nirakara upasana, God is seen as omnipresent and omnipotent.

Search for happiness

The happiness a person seeks in the material world is connected to sensory objects. This form of happiness can be destroyed in a moment. There is happiness while the object is there; when the object is gone, the happiness goes with it. People desire all that the world has to offer so they may be happy. However, the sages say that the joy you are chasing and the sorrow you are trying to avoid are both transitory. That which you consider unhappiness is momentary; it will pass. That which you consider happiness is also momentary; it too will pass. Joy and sorrow belong to this world, and are

attained through the senses and sense objects. If you want lasting happiness, you will have to go to the very source of bliss.

The nature of God is *ananda*, bliss, *sat*, truth, and *chit*, consciousness. This is why the goal of life is to become God-oriented and not world-oriented, even while living and performing in the world. To be God-oriented means giving bhakti a place in one's life. For a person oriented towards the material world, who is caught up in the world and identifying with the world, sensory enjoyment is the goal. However, for one who connects with God, the goal is not enjoyment but ananda, bliss, and *shanti*, peace. God, the Supreme Spirit or Paramatma, has been called 'the ocean of bliss', and when He is attained, all suffering in life automatically dissolves.

Psychological nature of bhakti

Bhakti is a state of mind and consciousness. Just as the desire for enjoyment is a state of mind and the desire for sense objects a tendency of the mind, similarly, when one desires to connect with God, develop positive qualities, eradicate tamas and cultivate the sattwic nature, one has to face one's own self. In this context, the nature of bhakti is psychological.



In the scriptures, bhakti has been considered a *vritti*, a modification of the mind. Yoga says there are five types of vrittis: *pramana* or direct knowledge, *viparyaya* or wrong knowledge, *vikalpa* or fancy, *nidra* or sleep, and *smriti* or memory. Influenced by tamas, rajas and sattwa, these five vrittis give rise to other vrittis which are expressed in one's behaviour.

The *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali state (1:5): *Vrittyah panchatyyah klishtaklishtah* – “In the five vrittis (of *pramana*, *viparyaya*, *vikalpa*, *nidra* and *smriti*) there is the experience of both happiness and unhappiness.” After going beyond these five, another vritti is born, the *brahmi vritti*, the self-aware, spiritual vritti. The *brahmi vritti* is also called the *bhakti vritti*, as it leads to identification with the source, the Brahman.

Vrittis of knowledge, action and emotion

The *Brahmasutra Bhashya* says: *Manastvekamaneke vrittikam* – “This mind has numerous vrittis.” In the treatises on bhakti, these vrittis are divided into three categories: *jnana vritti*, *bhavana vritti*, and *karma vritti*. There is a mutual relationship among them; one vritti is usually dominant, and the other two cooperate with and support that dominant vritti. For example, when *jnana* or knowledge is the dominant vritti, there is still an input of *bhavana*, emotion, and *karma*, action. When you are listening to a satsang on the subject of bhakti, the *jnana vritti* is predominant in you. What you hear evokes an emotion, and then the *bhavana vritti* comes into play. If you subsequently act according to what you hear, the *karma vritti* is engaged. The *jnana vritti* is predominant, yet the vrittis of *bhavana* and *karma* are supporting it.

Another example: imagine a player running with a football. While he is running, the *karma vritti* is dominant. Along with the *karma vritti*, the *jnana vritti* is also present as the player knows the position of the goal. He must overcome all obstacles he meets along the way as he moves towards the post to score a goal. Here, *karma vritti* is being supported by *jnana vritti*. Through the vritti of *jnana*, the *karma vritti*

is given an aim. When the player scores a goal, his bhavana vritti is awakened. He is elated that he has scored a goal and won a point. Whether you listen to satsang or play football, one vritti will be predominant and the other two vrittis will support it.

In the texts on bhakti, the bhavana vritti is given prominence. It is said in the *Ramacharitamanas*: *Jaki rahi bhavana jaisi prabhu moorat tin dekhi taisi* – “As is one’s emotion, so is one’s capacity to see the form of the Lord.” When there is an intense experience of the bhavana vritti, the body may tremble, the hair may stand on end and one may get goose bumps. These are the physical expressions of the bhavana vritti. When the heart is stirred by emotion, tears flow from the eyes, which is the *kriya vritti*, or action form, of the bhavana vritti. The bhavana vritti is full of *rasa*, a word which is difficult to translate. It roughly means sweet essence. By experiencing the *rasa* of the bhavana vritti, a person becomes loving and devoted. If there is not enough *rasa* in the bhavana vritti then the feeling of bhakti will not awaken; devotion, love, empathy and sensitivity will not grow. Thus, the bhavana vritti has a nourishing aspect, it spontaneously produces the qualities of love, faith and trust.

Yet another aspect of the bhavana vritti is passion, where one is overcome by a surge of energy. This energy sometimes takes the form of fear, sometimes anger, depression, introversion or extroversion. In fits of passion, a person may behave like a madman. There is a need for balance in bhakti, since it is not the aim of bhakti to become overcome by passion or to develop attachment. The aim of bhakti is to become one with the fountain of ananda, bliss. For the attainment of this aim, the brahmi vritti must be born.

Listening, seeing and contemplation

Whatever you see, hear or contemplate, the mind will identify with it. That is the nature of the mind. If you see something good, the mind will become one with it. If you see something that repulses you, the mind will also become one with that.

If you listen to some good words, the mind will identify with them. If you listen to some negative words, the mind will be influenced by those. Whatever the mind gathers through seeing, listening or experience becomes an integral part of human life and experience.

Shravana, or listening, is one of the fundamental *vrittis* in human beings. If you hear from someone, “You are a nice person,” you will feel pleased and happy. If you are told, “You are bad”, you will become unhappy just by listening to these words. Your mind identifies with whatever you hear, and you react accordingly. If you are called mad, you will react like a madman and if you are called good, you will react as a good person. By simply listening, seeing and thinking, a reaction is caused. You see a flower; you are attracted; you see something rotten and you run. Whatever you see, the mind identifies with it, and having become identified with it, the mind either accepts it or rejects it.

To hold the vision, a form is needed. Similarly, words and knowledge are necessary for listening. To think and contemplate, experience is necessary. If there is no experience, there is no thought. Thinking and experience are complementary to each other. Only when you think, speculate and contemplate do you gain experience; if there is no contemplation, effort, or speculation, what experience can there be? In the same manner, in *bhakti*, one *ishta*, one mantra and one remembrance is necessary. The *ishta* is the particular form of God you are devoted to, the chosen ideal. You may see the *ishta* in any form that appeals to you. See him or her in the earth, the sky, an idol, in every molecule, in the mind, yourself, the breath, in others: wherever you want and in whatever form you wish to see your *ishta*, do so. The form in which you see the *ishta* is, for you, the concrete, *sakara* form of the *ishta*.

Whatever you hear, let it be good. That will change and transform the mind. Listening to criticism and praise of others only wastes time. In criticism and counter-criticism, in gossip, you gain nothing. On the contrary, it reduces the

sensitivity of the mind. The capacity to comprehend becomes limited and you begin to base your thoughts on the opinions of others. You make your decisions based on the decisions of others. Gossip, criticism and praise, aversion and love, envy and jealousy, inclination and desire: all these stunt and limit your sensitivity and discrimination. However, when you hear something that gives you inner happiness and peace, and offers you a goal or aim in life, then that represents mental and emotional one-pointedness.

According to bhakti yoga, hearing, seeing and contemplation are the three main foundations through which you live in this world and accomplish all you need to. When the mind, attracted by hearing and thinking about God, begins to flow in the direction of God, then that flow is called bhakti. As long as the mental vritti is not flowing towards God, there is no bhakti. When all the vrittis of your mind connect with God through seeing, hearing and contemplation, then the bhakti bhavana manifests.

Definition of bhakti: seva, prem and jnana

The word 'bhakti' comes from the root 'bhaj sevayam'. By adding the suffix 'ktin' to the root 'bhaj' the word bhakti is created. *Ktin* means love and *bhaj* means *seva*, to serve. Bhakti is a connection of love. This is the description in the scriptures. Worship of God, contemplation on God and mantra japa are not considered bhakti; they are the means to bhakti. Contemplation or thinking, mantra japa, worship and prayer are methods. The definition of *bhakti* is an expression in life in which you experience love within yourself and through which others feel happy. *Seva*, selfless service to others, and *prem*, unconditional love, are the only two kinds of interactions in life that have been accepted as expressions of bhakti.

A *bhakta* is one in whose life service and love are awakened. Such love should be innocent, simple and guileless with not a trace of insincerity or expectation, just pure love. Only then does bhakti fructify. Commonly, the love you

experience in life is directed towards your family, friends, wealth or possessions. The scriptures have a different point of view. Sage Shandilya says that only supreme love towards God is bhakti.

Supreme love includes the emotion of love and the action of service, combined with jnana, the knowledge that 'I am doing God's work.' Thus, these three ideas converge in bhakti. 'I am serving God's will' is jnana, wisdom or knowledge. 'I am not doing it for myself but for others' is seva or selfless service, and 'I love everybody, my love has become universal' is supreme love. These three aspects together become bhakti. This is the interpretation of bhakti given by our paramguru, Swami Sivananda, and furthered by our guru, Swami Satyananda.



Stepping into Bhakti

5 July 2009, Morning

The scriptures say that bhakti is a *vritti*, a modification of the mind. Just as desire, anger, greed and attachment are *vrittis*, similarly, bhakti is a *vritti*. This *vritti* is saturated with *sattwa guna*, the quality of luminosity, harmony, goodness and purity. In the *Brahmasutra Bhashya*, Sri Shankaracharya says: *Manastvekamaneka vrittikam* – “There are many modifications and inclinations born of the mind.” Of these, some *vrittis* are connected with the senses, some with the emotions and some with the intellect and knowledge. When the sensory *vritti* is dominant in the mind, the senses are awakened; when the *jnana vritti* is dominant, the energy of the intellect is at work; during the dominance of the *bhavana vritti*, the emotions and sentiments are active.

Our paramguru Swami Sivananda says the same thing in a different way. He said that every human being comes into this world endowed with three faculties: head, heart and hands. The head refers to the intellect, the heart to the emotions, and the hands to the ability of the senses to awaken the creative potential. When your emotions are drawn towards the world, you become engrossed in enjoyment and attachment; when your emotions turn away from the world and become engrossed within, bhakti develops. When emotions are directed towards the world, there is *bhoga*, material enjoyment, and when the emotions turn inward, there is bhakti.

It has been said in the Vedas: *Samudram na stravatah sapta yahviih* – “Just as the seven rivers go towards the ocean and merge in it, when the extroverted tendencies of the mind turn inwards and connect with God, they cease to be; they become part of Paramatma, of bhakti, of Ishwara.” Our guru Swami Satyananda says that directing the emotions towards God is bhakti yoga.

Serve and love

Generally, people think that bhakti is performing worship; however, there are many different aspects of bhakti. It has been called a modification or *vritti* of the mind. The scriptures state that the word ‘bhakti’ has come from the root ‘bhaj sevayam’, to which the suffix ‘ktin’ is added, forming the word ‘bhakti’. The meaning of the root verb *bhaj sevayam* is to serve, and the meaning of the suffix *ktin* is to love. That is why bhakti is explained as *seva*, selfless service, and *prem*, and love. Prayer, worship or pooja are only methods of bhakti.

What is the real meaning of seva and prem? Seva, selfless service, is to work for the benefit of others. The action which brings happiness or benefit to another, improves another’s lot in life, is seva. What you desire and do for yourself is not seva; it is karma. When your feelings are connected with others then that action is not karma; it is called seva. The effort made for the happiness and elevation of others is seva. That is the first lesson in bhakti.

The first step is ‘bhaj sevayam’, seva, and the second step is adding ‘ktin’, meaning prem or love. The state of love is where your heart is soft towards everyone in the world, where you experience a sense of connection, empathy, affinity and oneness with all. Just as seva is the first step in bhakti, love is the second step; the confluence of both is bhakti.

Narada and Shandilya Bhakti Sutras

The bhakti tradition has two prominent texts. The first is the *Bhakti Sutras* by Sage Narada and the second is the *Bhakti Sutras* by Sage Shandilya. The bhakti propounded by Sage



Narada is emotion-based, whereas the bhakti propounded by Sage Shandilya is knowledge-based. In the knowledge-based bhakti, a person does not desire anything for himself or others; he wants only to be close to God. The emotion-based bhakti involves prayer and the desire to do away with the lack, suffering and sorrow in life. For this reason, knowledge-based bhakti has been considered nirakara bhakti and emotion-based bhakti, sakara bhakti.

Sage Narada says that supreme love towards God is bhakti. Sage Shandilya says that any kind of love and attraction towards God is bhakti. Love is seen in both definitions of bhakti. According to Sage Narada, only one who has freed his senses from the bondage of maya and is able to worship God with one-pointed devotion is a bhakta. He says that first you must free the senses and the mind from the bondage of maya. The bindings of maya are happiness and sorrow. You hope for happiness from the objects of attraction, and you want to avoid that which repels you.

The *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali state (2:7): *Sukhanushayi ragah* – “Raga is liking accompanying pleasure.” One becomes attached to that which gives pleasure. It is also said in the *Yoga*

Sutras (2:8): *Dukhamushayi dveshah* – “Dvesha is the repulsion accompanying pain.” Any object, action or conduct causing sorrow is always considered abhorrent. Everyone runs away from pain and unhappiness and wishes for pleasure and happiness; however, the happiness you desire in life is material happiness. Inner, spiritual, eternal joy is possible only when the very seed of desire for material happiness is destroyed in the mind and the seed of love for God sprouts in the heart.

Sri Swamiji says, “Awaken *atmabhava*, the ability to see yourself in all beings and to see them in yourself, and attain the love of God.” At present, your mind is identified with the senses and sense objects of the material world, not with the spirit. What does it mean to identify with something? If you fill a pot with water, the water moulds itself to the shape of the pot. Thus, the water is identified with the pot. If you break the pot, the water will be freed of that form. Similarly, the senses, while enjoying the sense objects and experiences of the world, take on the appearance and shape of the objects they are enjoying.

Your mind assumes the form of the things you see, hear and think about. For example, while taking a morning walk, you see something beautiful and attractive. This object you have seen is outside of you; it is separate from you. However, when you saw that beautiful, enchanting object, its picture was imprinted upon your mind. At that time, the mind and the object became one, they assumed the same form. Now, an emotion, a desire, a thought appears: ‘I want to acquire and possess it.’ This is *raga*, attraction, and *asakti*, attachment; this is the desire for happiness and satisfaction. Asakti is when you wish to possess an object due to attachment and attraction. The opposite is also true. If you see something you dislike, the mind identifies with the disliked object. The result is that you remove yourself from the object. This is called *virakti*, disenchantment.

Sivananda yoga: expression of bhakti

If *seva* and *prem* are the first and second steps in *bhakti*, then one more point is seen. Swami Sivananda taught *yoga*

to everybody. He taught hatha yoga, raja yoga, karma yoga, jnana yoga and bhakti yoga; he taught every aspect of yoga. He told his disciples, "Spread all over the world and propagate yoga and spirituality." When he described the sequence of spiritual life, he spoke of eight steps.

Sri Swamiji says that Sivananda yoga starts where Patanjali yoga ends. When you practise yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana and dhyana, and attain samadhi, Patanjali yoga ends there. Up to this point, you are trying to make yourself pure, balanced and disciplined, and awaken your potentials. Your effort is limited to yourself. Even if you attain the state of samadhi, you benefit only yourself and no one else. Sri Swamiji says that when Sage Patanjali's mental yoga is perfected, when Sage Swatmarama's and Sage Gheranda's physical yoga is perfected, at that point Sivananda yoga begins.

The first step in Sivananda yoga is serve. The second step is love. Service and love are concepts of bhakti, therefore Swami Sivananda's yoga begins with bhakti. When service and love become predominant in life, the mind is drawn to contemplation and remembrance of God, the Supreme Spirit. The devotee begins to see God and experience God's glory within himself, and expresses that glory. This is why the definition of bhakti is serve and love.

Bhakti and love

How can one understand love? There is a Persian word, *ishq*, which means love. There are two forms of *ishq*: *ishq mizazi* and *ishq haqiqi*. *Ishq haqiqi* is love inspired by the heart, and *ishq mizazi* is love inspired by the mind. Both are love, yet one is stemming from the heart, and the other is stemming from the brain. The love that everybody experiences in their life is intellectual love. Self-interest and personal aspirations lie hidden in that love. Whether it is love between children and parents, between friends, or a man and a woman, you always expect something from the other person. However, the love that springs from the heart is pure love. There is no craving,

want or desire in it, only the wish that the love towards one's Beloved grows and keeps on growing.

Swami Sivananda says there are four expressions of love. The first expression is a sensitive heart. The second expression is joyful affection. The third expression is an illuminated, radiant love. The fourth expression is a burning absorption. Just as love in the material world is expressed in a myriad of ways, so it is with God. In the physical world, when you love someone you become sensitive to them, a connection is awakened, affection develops, and this emotion steadily grows deeper and finally becomes love. It takes on the aspect of fiery, flaming love and every aversion burns to ashes in it.

Love is an expression that connects a person to his Beloved, to God. On the dark horizon of life, it is love that makes a beautiful rainbow. It is also the constant, guiding Pole Star in life. Love is the mother of literature, art, music, philosophy and patriotism. Without love there is no literature, no music, no art, no philosophy and no patriotism either. Love is such a powerful energy and force that when it awakens, a person can experience fullness in life. Love is the fragrance of the heart, in the absence of which one is like an animal.

Supreme love towards God is known as bhakti. If the mind becomes one with what you learn through hearing, what you see through sight, and what you contemplate through thinking, the emotion of love awakens. This is the beginning of bhakti in a person's life. Lac is a hard substance, yet it melts and liquefies when heated, and hardens again when cooled. While melting the lac, any colour may be added to it and it will take on that colour. Even upon hardening, it will retain the colour. Similarly, in bhakti, first the emotions become soft, and when you add the colour of bhakti to these softened emotions, it permeates them forever.

Sri Swamiji gives the example of crystal, which is colourless. Whatever colour the crystal is placed upon, it takes on that colour. If it is kept on something black, the crystal appears to be black; if placed on yellow it appears to be yellow; if on white,

it will take on that hue. On whatever colour the transparent crystal is placed, that colour is seen in the crystal.

The mind is the same. When the mind becomes one with an object, the colour of the object is seen in the mind. Bhakti has no colour of its own. It is transparent and pure.

Methods to attain bhakti

The methods of attaining bhakti have been described in the scriptures as: *Shravanam kirtanam Vishnoh smaranam padasevanam* – “Listen to the names of the Almighty, and serve other creatures while remembering Him.” Free your mind of anxiety and remember God. Anxiety is a natural human tendency. People worry if marriage is not taking place, and they worry if it does. If there are no children it is a matter of worry, and if there is a child, there is worry. There is worry if there is no job and worry when there is one. People are never free of anxiety, and that anxiety is always connected with worldly objects and matters. Even when you sleep at night, the thought process of anxiety is seen in the form of dreams. When you are awake, the same thought appears in the mind again and again.

When a thought preoccupies you, you lose sleep. When a distressing thought takes hold of the mind, you are unable to cope with the pain. When a pleasant thought obsesses you, you begin to imagine the heights of ecstasy. This is the influence of thoughts linked with worldly objects and experiences. If you link your thoughts to God and your attention is drawn to Him; if you think about and remember Him again and again, just as you remember your son or daughter, husband or wife, then He will draw your thoughts towards Himself. It is said:

*Shravanam kirtanam Vishnoh smaranam padasevanam,
archanam vandanam dasyam sakhyam atmanivedanam.*

These words sum up the tradition of bhakti. The path the sages have described is simple, yet deeply psychological. People think that bhakti is easy: ‘You do not have to do



anything, only think of God.’ Yes, you do not have to do anything in bhakti, only think of God, and the experience you have during this thought process is the beginning of bhakti. The meaning of bhakti is love for God. The devotee imbibes this love through *shravana*, listening; *kirtan*, devotional songs; *smarana*, remembrance; *padasevana*, service at the feet; *archana*, worship; *vandana*, praise; *dasya bhava*, the attitude of servitude; *sakhya bhava*, the sentiment of friendship; and *atmanivedana*, surrendering and dedicating one’s entire self to the divine. These processes cast the mind into the mould of bhakti.

The *Srimad Devi Bhagavatam* says there are three paths to the attainment of moksha. One path is karma yoga, the second is jnana yoga, and the third is bhakti yoga. Of these, bhakti yoga is said to be the most natural and easy. In this, all that is required is connecting the mind with your Beloved, your

chosen form of divinity. Jnana yoga is difficult, as it requires you to control the turbulent thoughts. Just as reins are needed to control a horse, just as a goad is needed to control an elephant, similarly jnana yoga and karma yoga are needed to control the dissipations, restlessness and distractions of the mind and to keep the senses in check. In bhakti, all you need do is turn the torchlight of the mind away from the world of senses and sense objects and towards God. According to the *Srimad Devi Bhagavatam*, bhakti yoga is attained spontaneously when there is a change in the mental direction. It also states that the fruits which accrue through the means of *karma* or action, *jnana* or knowledge, *vairagya* or non-attachment, yoga, charity, dharma, austerities, fasting or pilgrimage, can be attained effortlessly by the devotee through bhakti yoga.

Para and apara bhakti

Traditionally, bhakti has been divided into two categories. The bhakti that establishes the relationship between the devotee and God has been called *para bhakti* and that which is influenced by material objects, desires and circumstances has been called *apara bhakti*. Apara bhakti is worldly, para bhakti is spiritual. In apara bhakti, a person prays to God for happiness and removal of difficulties, problems and suffering. In para bhakti, the devotee makes an effort to know and to realize the indestructible soul within this destructible body. Apara and para, worldly and godly: the scriptures have spoken of these two aspects of bhakti.

Action or karma is an essential part of apara bhakti. There are regulations that govern an apara bhakta's life, such as chanting of specific mantras in the morning, afternoon or evening, rules for anushthana, rules for pooja, and so on. Para bhakti does not need any such ritualized actions or rules, only self-enquiry.

I told you of the incident in Swami Sivananda's life wherein he says, "I have not formally worshipped Devi in a ritualized way, but yes, every morning I repeat the Devi mantras. Whenever I encounter a woman, I mentally bow to

her and say, *Om Durgayai namaha.*” Since he was free from desire, what could he want for himself? From which hardship, sorrow, problem or suffering could he want to be freed? Which problem could he want resolved? His bhakti was para bhakti: *Siyaramamaya saba jaga jani; karaun pranama jori juga pani* – “The whole world as Sita-Rama I know; with folded hands to you I bow.” For one who sees God in the whole world, in all creatures, what need is there to go to a temple, wave lights and ring bells? For one whose life is infused with God and who cannot even be touched, much less moved, by objects, for such a devotee what need is there for the sadhana of apara bhakti? Such sadhana is needed for those who cannot free themselves from the clutches of the world, engrossed in the senses and sense objects. What need is there of *karmakanda*, ritualistic worship, for one already liberated from the world? He remains ever-blissful in that mental state. Such a person is called a *siddha*, a perfected being.

It is accepted that para bhakti belongs to a higher state of consciousness and apara bhakti is worldly. Nevertheless, there should not be a question as to which is superior or inferior. For you, apara bhakti is necessary, as you are limited by the senses and desires. You have not been able to develop a universal perspective. For you, apara bhakti is the first step and para bhakti is an attainment. This is the sequence everyone has to follow. In this way, there is an effort to change the direction of the mind. Apara bhakti makes the mind one-pointed, pure and clear. Therefore, you must set aside some time in the daily routine for a practice of worship.

While travelling as a child, I had the opportunity to stay at the homes of many people. Once I saw a man come out of the shower, wipe his wet body with a towel in one hand and simultaneously wave an incense stick in front of Hanuman’s picture with the other, while singing, *‘Jai Hanuman jnana guna sagara.’* He said, “What can I do? I do not have enough time, but I have to do something.” With this kind of attitude, how can bhakti be perfected? However, this way is not wrong either. Even if you eat merely one grain of sugar and

not a spoonful, you are still managing to put it into your mouth, which gives you a taste, even if it is only one grain of sweetness.

If you can bring some balance and restraint into your life, apara bhakti will change into para bhakti. At that stage, love towards God will be natural. Right now, your love towards God is not spontaneous due to the pull of sensory desires and cravings. As soon as you feel happiness and bliss in your life, you no longer remember God. Rahim says,

*Dukha men sumiran sab kare sukha men kare na koyā
Sukha men jo sumiran kare dukha kahe ko hoyā.*

In times of suffering, everyone remembers God, and never so in happiness. Were one to remember God in happy times, why will one ever suffer?

Kunti's prayer

After the Mahabharata war, Yudhishtira was crowned king, and order and dharma were established in the kingdom. Now Sri Krishna came to bid farewell to the Pandavas, saying it was time to return to Dwaraka. He said to Kunti, "Aunt, surely you



are happy now? Everything is good and auspicious in your life. The times of suffering and sorrow have passed and the times of happiness and joy have arrived. Permit me to return, and if there is anything else you want, let me know.”

Kunti replied, “Oh Krishna, now that we have attained happiness, wealth, comfort, kingdom, joy, glory, prosperity, name, fame and success, you are leaving us. If you want to give me something, then give me sorrow, as I have seen that whenever we have called out to you in our sorrow, you have appeared. When Draupadi was being disrobed, you appeared. When Rishi Durvasa came with his disciples to the Pandavas in the forest for lunch, we did not have even a grain of food to feed them. We thought of you and immediately you appeared. Oh Lord, in moments of distress, whenever we thought of you, you were there. Now that happiness has come our way, you are going far away from us; you have come to bid farewell. Oh Keshava, I do not want the happiness of the world that takes me away from you; let me have the sorrow by which I will always remember you and think of you.”

Compare Kunti’s sentiments and your own. You never say to God, “Give me sorrow so I may remember you.” Instead, you say, “Please give me happiness so I may enjoy this world and lead a joyous life.”

Nature of para bhakti

The sentiment of a bhakta, a devotee, and the sentiment of a person engrossed in the world of the senses, sense objects and pleasure are different. A bhakta desires nothing for himself. Once upon a time there was a sadhu who worshipped God for a long time. Pleased by his penance, God appeared before him. Now, God is also bound by habit. Whenever He meets a devotee, He says, “Ask for a boon.” Accordingly, when He appeared before the sadhu, out of habit God said, “Ask for a boon.” The sadhu had prayed not for the fulfilment of some desire, only for a vision of God. He said, “God, I don’t want anything from you. I only wanted to see you, and so I have.”

God said, "I am bound by my word. Once the words 'Ask for a boon' leave my mouth, you have to ask for something." The devotee replied, "God, you are insulting my bhakti. On the one hand you are omniscient and on the other hand you are saying, 'Ask for a boon.' I never wanted anything. What has happened to your omniscience?"

God said, "Look here, spellbound by love I forgot who I was coming to see. You called me and I came, and still under the spell of love, I said, 'Ask for a boon.' Now I am bound by my word." The sadhu replied, "If you are bound by your word, I am bound by my resolve. I did not pray to you motivated by some desire. I had resolved only to see you, to have a vision of you. That is done, so now you can go. Return to your *loka*, your realm."

God thought, 'Devotees I've met many, yet none have told to me to return to my own realm.' God tried again, "Look, I am telling you this one last time: ask for something. I am bound by my promise, my word." The devotee said, "You're saying it for the last time and I already said it the very first time that I don't want anything. You are insulting my love. I am going; you can keep standing here." Turning his back to God he set out on his way.

God looked with eyes filled with love at the retreating back of his devotee. He said to himself, 'I have never come across such a devotee before. What shall I do? I have to give him a boon, bound as I am by my words.' He blessed the devotee's shadow with the boon that whoever or whatever it would fall upon would become happy, prosperous, fulfilled and healthy. The sadhu did not know this. He had finished what he had set out to do, he had received the vision of God and he kept on walking. When the sadhu's shadow fell upon a dry tree, it was revived and laden once again with leaves and fruit. The sadhu's shadow fell upon a leper and he became free of leprosy. His shadow fell upon a blind man who regained his sight. His shadow fell upon a dead body and it came back to life. Without the sadhu's knowledge and by God's grace, his shadow kept working miracles. This is the nature of para bhakti.





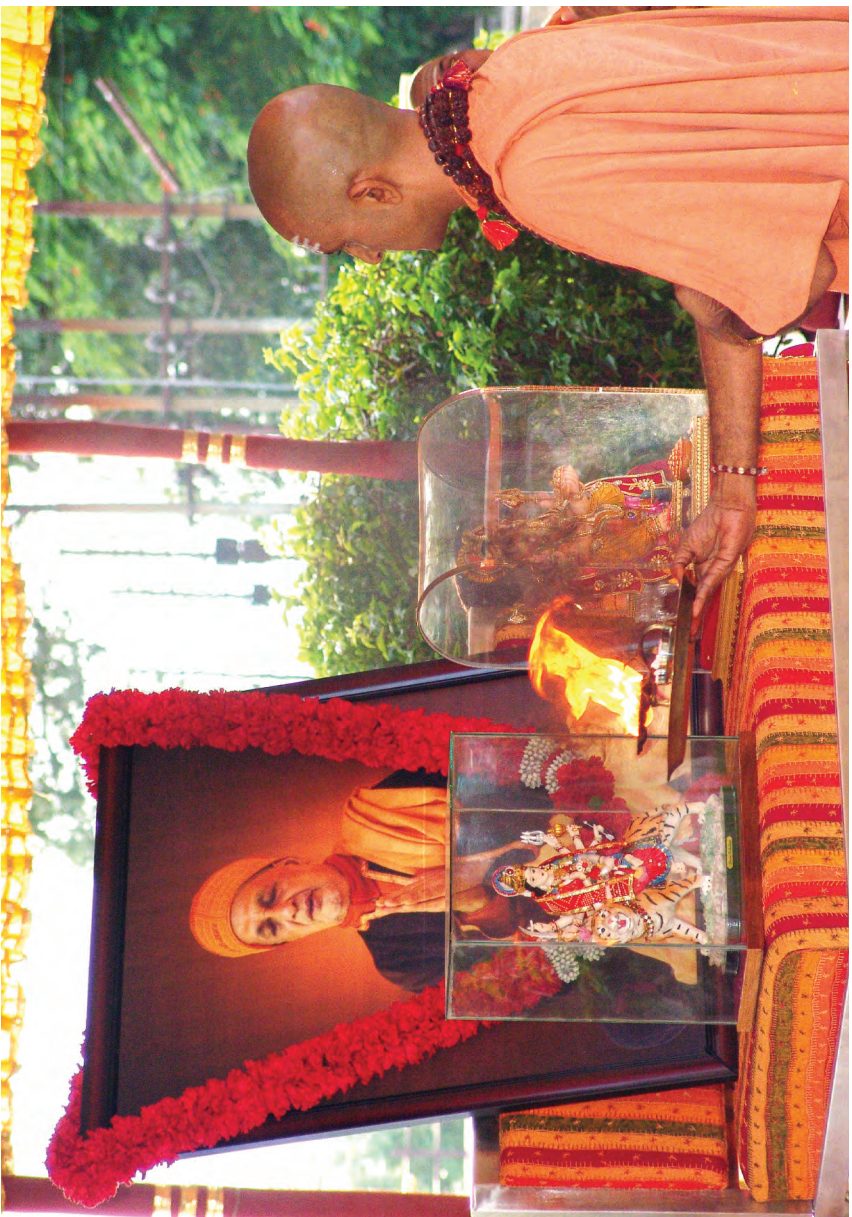












Nature of apara bhakti

Once upon a time, there lived two neighbours who were both devout bhaktas. God was pleased with both of them. He appeared before one of the devotees and said, “Ask for a boon.” The devotee said, “God, all I want is bhakti.” God said, “As you wish.” After that, He appeared before the other devotee and said, “Ask for a boon.” This second devotee knew that God had visited his neighbour first and he was jealous. He folded his hands and said to God, “God, my wish is that whatever I ask for, my neighbour should get twice of that.” God said, “So be it” and left. Now, this devotee who was becoming green with jealousy, said, “Let me go blind in one eye.” He lost his vision in one eye, but his neighbour lost it in both. Then he said, “God, let me break one leg.” His neighbour broke both legs. Finally he said, “God, let there be a well at my front door.” A well appeared both at the front and the back of his neighbour’s house. People also pray to God out of jealousy, hostility and to cause distress to others when the negative, destructive and tamasic traits influence the prayers and sentiments.

Many such examples can be given of para and apara bhakti; however, first it is necessary to establish what type of a devotee is drawn to the para or apara form of bhakti. Four kinds of devotees are described in the scriptures and they have been divided into two categories. The first category includes the arta and artharthi devotees who practise apara bhakti. In the second category are the jignasu and jnani bhaktas who practise para bhakti. Most people fall into the arta and artharthi category. A few select sadhakas who have no desires left in life fall into the jignasu category, and of those jignasus, the rare few who are looking within for the Supreme Spirit, fall into the jnani category.

The obstacle of pride

You begin your journey as an *arta*, one seeking to relieve personal suffering, or an *artharthi*, one seeking the fulfilment of material desires. Before beginning a journey, it is

important to know of the obstacles on the path. The most significant obstacle in bhakti is pride and the five hurdles related to pride. The first obstruction is *jati abhimana*, pride of caste or race: 'I am so and so'. You connect yourself to a projected notion of yourself, a self-image and identify with it. In India, often a brahmin will only see himself as a brahmin, and a kshatriya will see himself only as a kshatriya. This is pride of caste, which is detrimental to bhakti. In order to overcome this, eradicate the idea of superior and inferior and see everyone equally as a child of God. The thoughts, 'I am great, I am wise, I am a man, I am knowledgeable, I am a brahmin' inflate the ego. When the ego is inflated, the emotions cannot remain focused on God. Pride of caste or race is a big obstruction on the path of bhakti.

The second obstacle is pride of learning. 'I am a degree holder, I have studied so much, I have written so many books, I have learnt so many philosophies.' This is pride of learning.

The third obstacle is pride of status. The elevated one becomes arrogant and will not bow before another. If a destitute becomes a king, he will walk arrogantly. When a poor man becomes wealthy, he becomes egoistic. This is pride of status. All the softness disappears from the heart, the person becomes arrogant and thinks, 'Now that I have become someone to be reckoned with, I will show others.'

The fourth hindrance is pride of beauty and pride of youth. As one crosses the age of forty, pride of youth reduces spontaneously.

The bhakti shastras consider pride of caste, learning, status, youth and beauty, as impediments to bhakti. That is why, before you start anything, first check your life, your pride, ego and arrogance. See which kind of pride defeats you in your life. As long as there is pride in your life, you will not be able to progress on the path of bhakti. Just as there are speed bumps on a road, these are the speed bumps of Bhakti Street. Whenever you near these, your car will slow down and once you cross them, the car will accelerate again.

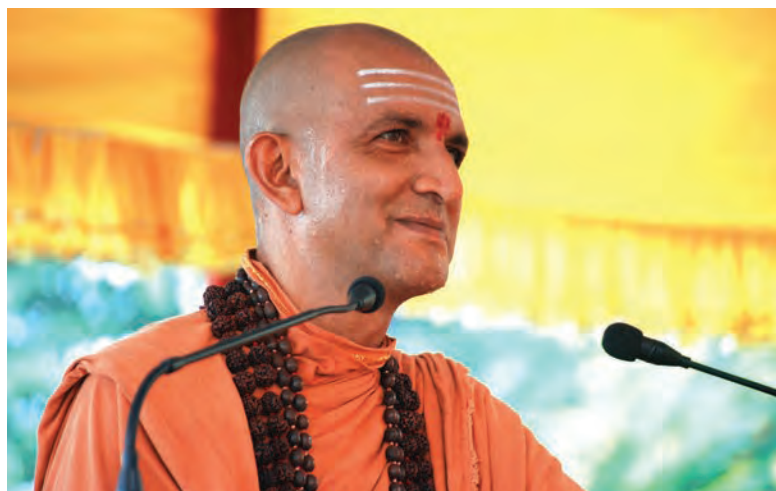
Five enemies of bhakti

Bhakti also has enemies. The first is *kama*, lust. Before he became a saint, Tulsidas was a married man. He loved his wife intensely and he was very attached to her. All day he would admire his wife's beauty. One day she went to her maternal home. Tulsidas returned from the market and found the house empty. Upon asking the neighbours, he found that his wife had gone to her mother's.

His wife's maternal home was not far. Tulsidas thought he would follow his wife; after all, the place was only a few kilometres away. As he set off, darkness was falling. There was a river ahead and, being the monsoon season, it was in spate. It was dark when Tulsidas reached the riverbank. All the boats were tied up and there was no boatman in sight. Tulsidas thought he would cross the river himself with the help of a log of wood. In the darkness, he saw a log floating past, so he jumped into the water and holding on to it, crossed to the other side. By the time he reached his wife's village, it was late in the night.

His wife's room was on the first floor and Tulsidas wondered how he was going to enter the house, as everyone would be asleep. All of a sudden, his eyes fell upon a rope that was hanging from the first floor. Holding on to the rope, he climbed up and rattled the window. His wife opened the window. She was amazed to see him. "You are here!" she exclaimed. Tulsidas said, "I love you very much. In your absence my life is empty." When he showed his wife the rope he had used to climb up to her window, he found that it was a long snake! The 'log' he had used to float across the river was actually a corpse, bloated by the water. His wife told him that if his love for God was even one-tenth of his love for her, he would have been freed from the shackles of the world. When Tulsidas heard this from his wife, he turned right around and engrossed himself in remembrance of God and became one of the greatest bhaktas ever.

People are so blinded by sensual and sexual desire that they cannot discriminate between right and wrong. This is



the reason sexual passion is considered the first enemy of bhakti. According to the bhakti scriptures, this enemy can be overcome through *brahmacharya*, normally translated as celibacy. It is necessary for a householder to have sexual relations; however, *brahmacharya* can be practised alongside, by removing the desire from the mind.

Once upon a time, two sannyasins were wandering along the banks of the Ganges. Close to the banks was a canal, and on the other side was a young girl. On seeing the sannyasins, the girl asked them to help her cross the canal. One of them picked the girl up in his arms, crossed the canal and stood her on the other side. The other sannyasin thought to himself, 'This *gurubhai*, brother disciple of mine, has touched a girl. Now I'll tell Guruji about him and then we'll have some fun.' When both of them went back to the ashram to their guru, the second sannyasin started, "Guruji, this sannyasin has done something wrong today." The guru asked, "What is the wrongdoing?" "He picked up a girl in his arms," replied the sannyasin. "What was the reason for picking her up?" asked the guru. "To cross the stream," said the sannyasin. The guru said, "No, he has not done anything wrong. He carried the girl across the stream and left her there. You,

however, are still carrying her with you!” This is an example of a tendency of the mind. One of them picked the girl up and put her down, whereas the other was bothered by the thought for hours.

Brahmacharya does not mean simply abstaining from sexual relations. Brahmacharya means that Brahma-like conduct shines through every activity and thought in life. There is constant awareness of the higher reality, and every expression reflects goodness. Do good and you will reap goodness. Brahmacharya means to follow truth and not untruth. Brahmacharya means not remaining wrapped up in sexual desires, not having expectations, and overcoming desire. Sensuality is a bhakta’s prime enemy; however, it can be overcome by connecting the mind to God and the higher reality, so the mind remains in the state of brahmacharya.

The second enemy of bhakti is *krodha*, anger, as anger prevents one from attaining bhakti. Anger can be overcome by forgiveness. The third enemy is *lobha*, greed. A greedy person cannot achieve bhakti. Greed can be overcome by non-attachment. Imagine that your neighbour is a dear friend and he is leaving town for a few days. He gives you the key to his house and asks you to watch over it in his absence as there are valuable things in the house. The neighbour gives you the key and goes away, and you begin to look after the house. His house contains many beautiful things that do not belong to you; you are only the caretaker. When he comes back, you return the key to him. When you looked after his house and belongings, your sentiment was that of non-attachment. Nevertheless, you did not forget your duty and responsibility in that non-attachment. It is the sense of duty that develops non-attachment and provides the strength and energy to do what is necessary. If you are unaware of the responsibility, greed will arise, and greed gives rise to acquisitiveness. For this reason, the enemy in the guise of greed has to be defeated through non-attachment.

The fourth adversary is confusion and that can be resolved through contemplation. Many people fall prey to thinking

about what to do, what not to do, whom to ask, whom not to ask, and they get confused. Through contemplation they can find a way out of their confusion. Confusion arises in the absence of contemplation, awareness, intelligence, wisdom and experience. When a certain maturity is reached through contemplation, confusion will not arise.

The fifth adversary is worldly love. The emotion of love expressed between husband and wife, son, daughter, friend, best friend and other close relations must become universal, rather than restricted and limited. If it cannot become universal, worldly love becomes an obstacle on the path of bhakti.

A grandmother is sitting at home doing her japa. While doing so, she says to her daughter-in-law, "My son's trousers have to be stitched today. Don't forget to take them to the tailor's." She completes a few more beads and again says, "The milk is on the stove; see that it doesn't spill over." Once again, she completes a few more beads and says, "Ah, it is my grandson's birthday today; make sure his shoes are polished." On the one hand, she is practising bhakti towards God; on the other hand, her entire attention is on the household tasks. If you say, "Grandma, why are you paying so much attention to the household? Pay attention to the japa," do you know what Grandma will reply? She will say, "It is due to love that I pay attention to them. If I didn't love my son and grandchildren, why would I have bothered with the tailoring of the trousers or having the shoes polished? It is due to love that I say all these things." This is ordinary, material, worldly love. This love has to be transformed into universal love. The relationship of 'we', 'me and mine', 'the two of us', 'my family' must be enlarged into a relationship with God; the exclusive, constricted and limited must become the universal.

These are the five internal enemies a bhakta has to wrestle and overcome. The practices that can help: sensuality through brahmacharya; anger through forgiveness; greed through non-attachment; confusion through contemplation,

and worldly love through love for the higher, universal, divine power. Bhakti is not merely the ringing of bells; it is a process of psychological transformation in life to move from the negative, restricted, conditioned nature towards the positive, uplifting, creative and transcendental power.

Five emotional states in bhakti

There are five *bhavas*, emotional conditions, that arise in bhakti. Without emotion, there is no bhakti. Emotion indicates a relationship with the Beloved. Sri Swamiji says, “I am a servant of God. I do as He makes me do.” In his own words: “I tried many kinds of relationships with God in my life. I thought of God as my friend and was not happy with that. I thought of God as my child and was not happy with that. I thought of God as my lover and that did not make me happy either. I experienced joy when I found out that I am God’s servant, and I still live with that attitude of service.”

Emotion establishes human relationships. Sri Swamiji always says you should decide what your relationship with God should be. You cannot be a bhakta in the real sense of the word unless you establish an emotion within yourself through which you can recognize your relationship with God. Once a relationship is established through the medium of emotion, you become a bhakta.

In the relationship with God, first comes the bhava of peace, then the bhava of service. As long as the human mind is easily distracted, it cannot be centred on God. That is why, before you begin worship, you should calm yourself. This is the bhava of peace. During worship, bring the thought to mind that you are only a servant of God. This is the bhava of service. It is stated in the bhakti texts that these are the two bhavas for those who are starting their journey on the path of bhakti.

When people practise yoga, anushtana, mantras, first the body is made steady, then the movement of the senses is stilled, and after that the mind is quietened and focused on a symbol. At this point the practice begins. First, physical

stability, then mental stability, and then the practice. This is the yogic method. Similarly, in bhakti, shift the mind away from the objects of the world and stabilize it in a peaceful mood. Other than you and your Beloved, there is no one else in the world and therefore no reason for the mind to be distracted. Bring to mind the thought, 'I am a servant.' The journey on the path of bhakti begins only with the emotion of service.

Once the journey has begun, three other emotions manifest: friendship, parental love and romantic love. First comes the attitude of friendship or *sakhya bhava*: 'I am God's friend, best friend or well-wisher.' Examples of *sakhya bhava* are Sudama and Krishna, and Sugriva and Rama. When the relationship between two individuals deepens, it becomes friendship. If there is no depth in the relationship, there is no *sakhya bhava* either. *Sakhya bhava* indicates closeness in the relationship.

After *sakhya bhava* comes *vatsalya bhava*, parental affection, the manner in which children are loved by their parents. A mother will go hungry herself to feed her child. A mother sacrifices so much for her child. What emotion inspires her? Parental affection or *vatsalya bhava* inspires her. The emotion of parental affection makes a human being capable of sacrifice. You forget yourself and the image of another comes into the mind.

Lastly, there is romantic love or *madhurya bhava*: *Adharam madhuram vadanam madhuram*. Everything looks sweet, everything looks beautiful, everyone seems faultless, without any shortcomings. In *madhurya bhava*, only fulfilment is experienced.

The bhakti texts have spoken of these five emotional attitudes or bhavas. A person begins the journey on the path of bhakti with the bhavas of peace and service, then gradually awakens the bhavas of *sakhya* or friendship, *vatsalya* or parental affection, and *madhurya* or romantic love. These five bhavas are necessary for *jignasu* and *jnani bhaktas*. There are other bhavas for the *arta* and the *artharthi*.

Foundation of Bhakti

5 July 2009, Afternoon

The program being conducted here is not a discourse on bhakti; it is *bhakti aradhana*, complete immersion in worship. The Mahamrityunjaya mantra, the Gayatri mantra, the Durga mantras, the Guru mantras, and the other vedic mantras being chanted here, the bhajans and kirtans being sung, the stotras being chanted: all these are a part of bhakti aradhana. Their purpose is to centre the mind in one emotion, to awaken that emotion, and to gather the dissipated tendency of the mind and focus it in that emotion.

Worldly life consists of sensory enjoyment and pleasure, and spiritual life consists of bhakti. There is material enjoyment in the world of the senses and sense objects, and



there is yoga in spirituality. Disease is the outcome of material enjoyment and indulgence, while moksha is the outcome of yoga. *Moksha* means inner peace and inner happiness, liberation from suffering. By divine grace, a person can be freed from the bondage of karma, suffering and sorrow. The path of bhakti is one of connecting to one's inner self. Overcoming the obstacles that come up during this process is the effort or *purushartha* one has to make in life.

A big obstruction on the path of bhakti is *abhimana*, pride, no matter what form it takes. Abhimana hangs like a curtain between the *atma*, the individual spirit, and *Paramatma*, the Supreme Spirit, preventing the light of the Supreme Spirit from illuminating one's life. Thus, a bhakta has to be alert about pride. Nobody knows when pride enters one's life, when it grows, from where it comes and what its result is. If someone is knowledgeable, there is arrogance. If someone is beautiful, there is conceit. If someone is famous and successful, self-importance predominates in the personality and character. If someone is wealthy, there is a feeling of superiority. It seems that abhimana is the fruit of happiness in life. When someone acquires material happiness, the fruit of pride grows on the tree of their life. Pride is the result of worldly happiness. Pride is the foundation of the life of a person who looks only towards the material world for everything. To be aware of this pride, to be alert to it is the first effort, the first sadhana on the path of bhakti. To give up pride, to sing the name of the Lord and to be humble and modest are the signs of a bhakta.

Besides abhimana, there are five other qualities that are enemies of bhakti: lust, anger, greed, confusion, and worldly love. You have to manage these and keep enlarging your love beyond its limited boundary. Desire is overcome by elevating the thoughts, anger is conquered by forgiveness, greed is vanquished by renunciation and detachment, confusion of the mind is controlled by contemplation, and remembrance of God transforms ordinary love into divine love. When you think of your husband or wife, the love you experience

will not be divine. When you remember God, the love you experience is divine since it is not connected to selfishness or self-oriented desire. That divine love establishes a deep connection between the *jivatma*, individual soul, and its source. This connection, this relationship, is called bhakti.

Five kinds of worship

There are five methods of worship in bhakti. If an arta bhakta follows someone's advice to perform a certain ritual or call upon a spirit to be free of problems, then this constitutes the lowest kind of worship. In an effort to attain siddhis or to acquire something, some people try to gain control over others or spirits or departed souls and practise worship towards that end. All this is considered to be the lowest kind of worship and bhakti.

At the second level, people worship rishis, devatas, nature, and so on. Then there are those who worship the various forms of gods and avatars, such as Rama, Krishna, the saints and the enlightened gurus. This is worship at the third level. The fourth level is worship of the manifest Brahma, and the fifth level is worship of the unmanifest Brahma.

These are the five kinds of worship practised in bhakti. The worship of disembodied souls or spirits is the lowest level and the worship of the unmanifest Brahma is the highest. The worship of gurus or the incarnations of God are considered to be at the medium to high level. 'High level' or 'low level' are merely words used for the purpose of understanding. A low level means a state wherein the consciousness is not flowing upwards; it is still mostly engrossed in material phenomena and the world of senses and sense objects. At the highest level of worship, the consciousness is expanding and progressing. A person is unable to overcome negative, tamasic conditioning in the lower levels. The purpose of bhakti is to cultivate *sattwa*, the luminous, pure nature in life, and this purpose is realized only with the highest level of worship.

Many methods of worship and belief can be seen in society. Someone is praying to one form of the divine,

someone else is worshipping another form, yet another person is offering adoration to another aspect, somebody is undertaking a special sadhana or *anushthana*, someone is going to the church, someone to the temple, somebody is practising in solitude, another at the marketplace. People adopt different methods of sadhana according to their natures and temperaments. One's desire and emotions inspire one to worship or establish a relationship with the divine. If there is no such desire or emotion then the person does not have a relationship with the divine.

Internal enemies of bhakti

First, you need to be free of the negative, destructive and tamasic conditions in your life that cause you to experience lust, anger, aversion, jealousy, hostility and other such emotions, giving birth to cravings and desires. Upon liberation from these tamasic states, you may begin to adopt some positive, sattwic traits and qualities. This is your personal effort to improve yourself, and to move from tamas to sattwa. Do not think that kirtan, bhajan, prayer, worship, ritual or mantra japa will change everything automatically. This does not happen. You can place a plate of food in front of you, stare at it, touch it and smell it all day long; however, this will not fill your stomach. Until you eat the food, chew it and swallow it, your stomach will not be filled. Similarly, no matter how many mantras you chant, there will be no transformation, as you still have to deal with your mind.

When doing mantra japa, do you know where the mind runs away after the fifth bead? You cannot hold your concentration for ten beads during mantra japa, yet you want transformation in life. That is why you need to know all these internal enemies, understand them and bring about a spiritual transformation in the worldly tendency of the mind.

Bhakti and purification

The first attainment of bhakti is purification of the senses. This means that whatever you see, hear, touch, smell, or taste,



you accept all these as given by God. You do not try to fulfil your own wishes and desires through the senses. This body, mind and emotions are God's gifts to you, yet you misuse them. A knife has been given to you with the feeling that you will use it to chop vegetables, to help you cook; however, you misuse the knife by employing it to hurt someone. The fault is not that of the knife, but of the mind that uses it.

As long as the intellect is stuck in and directed by selfishness, it will be negative and tamasic. The selfish intellect can never be sattvic, disciplined and balanced. For this reason purification of the senses is necessary. Experience the *param tattwa*, the supreme element, in all that you smell, see, touch and taste. Do not use the senses merely to gratify yourself. If you see something beautiful, perceive the supreme element in it. When you listen to a speech, hear the supreme element in it. When smelling a fragrance, smell the supreme element in it. While touching, feel the supreme element in that experience.

Recall how carefully Swami Sivananda used his spectacles and pen. In his lifetime, not a thing slipped out of his hands, fell and broke. Think of how expanded his awareness was. He was extremely alert and aware towards the things you treat with negligence and carelessness. He was aware of where he was keeping his dhoti, how he was folding it; he did not just throw the dhoti on a chair. No; he honoured the dhoti, the pen, the spectacles and the paper. He must have experienced some element or energy in those things. He was able to see the element of God in the inanimate, in everything. “You are the ray of awareness in the inanimate” – this is the nature and quality of God.

The senses, the mind, the thoughts, the emotions and the soul are all purified through bhakti. In the twelfth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna talks about the signs of a bhakta. He does not discuss the methods and disciplines of bhakti, instead he talks about how an alert and watchful bhakta behaves (12: 13–20):

*Adveshtaa sarvabhootaanaam maitrah karuna eva cha;
Nirmamo nirahankaarah samadukhasukhah kshamee.*

He who hates no creature, who is friendly and compassionate to all, who is free from attachment and egoism, balanced in pleasure and pain.

*Santushtah satatam yogee yataatmaa dridhanishchayah;
Mayyarpitamanobuddhiryo madbhaktah sa me priyah.*

Forgiving, ever content, steady in meditation, possessed of firm conviction, self-controlled, with mind and intellect dedicated to Me, he, My devotee, is dear to Me.

*Yasmaannodvijate loko lokaannodvijate cha yah;
Harshaamarshabhayodvegairmukto yah sa cha me priyah.*

He by whom the world is not agitated and who cannot be agitated by the world, and who is freed from joy, envy, fear and anxiety – he is dear to Me.

*Anapekshah shuchirdaksha udaaseeno gataavyathah;
Sarvaarambhaparityaagee yo madbhaktah sa me priyah.*

He who is free from wants, pure, expert, impartial, and untroubled, renouncing the feeling of doership all undertakings or commencements – he who is (thus) devoted to Me, is dear to Me.

*Yona hrishyati na dveshti na shochati na kaangkshati;
Shubhaashubhaparityaagee bhaktimaan yah sa me priyah.*

He who neither rejoices, nor hates, nor grieves, nor desires, renouncing good and evil, and who is full of devotion, is dear to Me.

*Samah shatrau cha mitre cha tathaa maanaapamaanayoh;
Sheetoshnasukhadukheshu samah sangavivarjitah.*

He who is the same to foe and friend, and in honour and dishonour, who is the same in cold and heat and in pleasure and pain, who is free from attachment.

*Tulyanindaastutirmaunee santushto yena kenachit;
Aniketah sthiramatir bhaktimaan me priyo narah.*

He to whom censure and praise are equal, who is silent and contemplative, content with anything, homeless, of a steady mind, and full of devotion – that person is dear to Me.

*Ye tu dharmyaamritamidam yathoktam paryupaasate;
Shraddhadhaanaa matparamaa bhaktaaste'teeva me priyaah.*

They verily who follow this immortal dharma as described above, endowed with faith, regarding Me as their supreme goal, they, the devotees, are exceedingly dear to Me.

Sri Krishna says that only such a person who has removed all the impurities and darkness from his life is dear to me. In the *Ramacharitamanas*, Sri Rama says: *Mohi kapat chhal chhidra na bhava* – “I do not like a person who is scheming or deceitful, whose life is sullied. I like a person who has no hostility towards anyone, who sees me in everyone.” Aversion

comes when there is a sense of duality. When the feeling of ‘you’ and ‘I’ ends and there is experience and worship of only the one element, then all hostility ends. Therefore, Rama and Krishna say, “I like a person who is free of all hostility, who is friendly, compassionate, who has transcended ‘me and mine’, who is free of ego, who is able to accept happiness and sorrow with equanimity; one who is not exhilarated by joy nor distracted by sorrow; one who can forgive, who is content, one who is determined and who has surrendered his mind and intellect to God. That person is dear to me who has no fear, excitement, jealousy, agitation, who has no expectations of anyone, who is pure, dexterous, indifferent to the world, who does not ever think of himself as the doer.”

Sri Krishna enumerates the qualities of a true devotee in the twelfth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita* so one may become more aware of oneself, remove the impurities and tamas from one’s life, and cultivate purity, luminosity and sattwa. This is also the basic teaching of spiritual life.

Faith and trust

On the path of bhakti, two pillars or supports are essential for the mind: faith and trust. In the *Ramacharitamanas*, faith and trust have been acknowledged as the foundation of bhakti (1:2):

*Bhavaaneeshankarau vande shraddhaavishwaasroopinau;
Yaabhyaam vinaa na pashyanti siddhaah
svaantasthameeshvaram.*

Without *shraddha* and *vishwas*, faith and deep conviction, even great siddhas cannot achieve spiritual attainment.

Without faith and trust, even an adept cannot see the Spirit within, cannot understand, know, or recognize that. Therefore, faith and trust are considered to be the foundation of bhakti: faith in the higher power and trust in oneself. Have faith in God and trust in yourself.

Usually, people do not believe in themselves, they think they are weak and powerless, and they question their ability

and capacity to do something in life. Even before beginning a task they feel defeated by it. There is a lack of *sankalpa shakti*, power of resolve; *iccha shakti*, power of will; and *kriya shakti*, power of action in life. If you are determined, you can accomplish anything in life. Resolve comes with trust: trust in one's own capacity and capability. Remember, God has not sent you into this world with anything less than the next person. The same power and energy in Rama or Buddha, Mahavira, Krishna, Jesus Christ or Prophet Mohammed are also within you. The difference is that they have realized it and you have not been able to realize it. God has given that capacity equally to all. No one has more or less; everyone has the same capacity.

From a psychological point of view, God is an expression and experience of the evolution of consciousness; that is all. When a child goes to school, he learns and acquires knowledge of the alphabet. In the process of intellectual development, gradually many things are learnt, the understanding grows, the consciousness grows. The child who could not even write 'ABC', can grow up to become the head of a country, a great scientist or even a great saint. For that, the consciousness needs to undergo the process of development, whereby the child expands his consciousness, mind, intellect and emotions. From this viewpoint, God is an experience of the maturity of your mind. Maturity of the mind results in attraction for God, knowledge of God, belief in God, and attaining a vision of God.

Trust and faith are the foundation of bhakti. Trust that you are capable of acquiring joy, comfort and competence in life. Have faith that you are not alone in the world, that there is someone with you who is your intimate friend, closer to you than your husband or wife, closer even than your children, someone who is inherent in you.

In ancient Sparta newborn babies were left outside the house all night, regardless of snow, rain or heat. The baby faced the natural conditions outside all night long. If it lived until the morning, it was brought back inside the

house. There was another custom followed there. When a boy reached the age of sixteen, he was blindfolded and left in the dense forest. There would be wild, ferocious animals all around. Sometimes a tiger roared, sometimes a cheetah called. The blindfolded boy would be petrified. In the morning he was brought home and said to have become a man.

Once, after having gone through this process, a boy asked his father, "Tell me, when a child is left in the forest to become a man, don't the parents worry that some ferocious animal will kill the child and eat him?" The father said, "Son, since you have passed the test I will tell you the secret. When you were blindfolded and left in the jungle, you were never alone. You thought that you were alone, but ten steps away from you I stood well-armed to protect you from dangerous animals. You did not know that someone was ten steps away from you, protecting you."

It is the same in your life. You think you are alone; however, you are never alone. Once, a devotee who was a dear friend of God said to Him, "Let us go for a walk." God said, "Fine. You walk in front, I will walk behind you." The devotee asked, "How will I know that you are walking behind me?" God replied, "Whenever you turn around you will find two sets of footprints: one set will be mine, the other set yours. By that you will know that I have been walking with you."

Happily, the devotee started to walk. He crossed a river, a jungle, a mountain. Many times he felt that God was walking behind him; he could hear the sound of footsteps. Many times he felt he was alone and upon turning around he would see only a single set of footprints. Finally, he felt dejected and said, "God, you are not keeping your word. You said that you would always be with me, but many times when I turn around to look, you are not with me, and I see only a single set of footprints on the ground. Why do you disappear?"

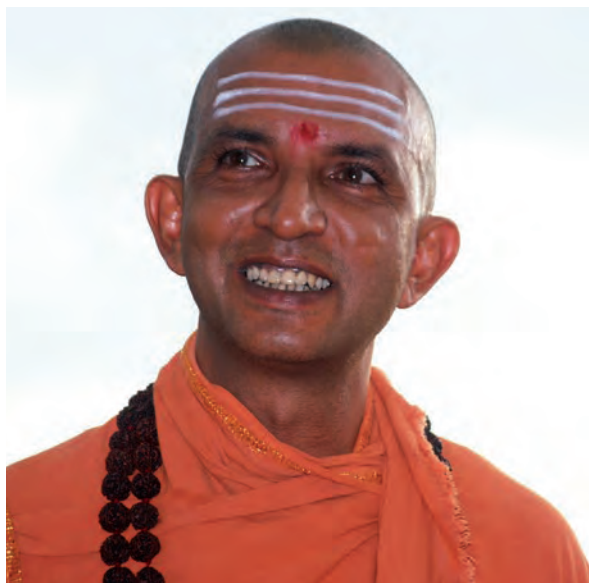
God said, "I do not disappear. When the path is difficult, I carry you in my arms. That is why you see only one set of footprints. When the path is easy, I put you down, we walk

together again and you see two sets of footprints.” When the path is easy God leaves one to stand on one’s own feet, “Child, walk. There is no problem here, keep walking.” The moment the going gets tough, God picks up His devotee in His arms and carries him.

You will find that all the great saints in history, no matter which culture or religion they belonged to, experienced God constantly in their lives, and the basis of that realization was faith and trust.

Saguna and nirguna bhakti

There are two kinds of bhakti, saguna and nirguna. *Apara* bhakti, or worldly bhakti is considered to be saguna and *para* bhakti or supreme bhakti is considered nirguna. *Saguna* means with form; the mind focuses on the point where you perceive or see some quality, form or name. After all, how are you recognized? You are identified by your name, known by your qualities and recognized by your face and form. Name, form and qualities: by these three things a person is known.



Who will know you if you do not have a name? By assuming a name, you will be recognized immediately. Who will know you if you lose your form? Assume a form and you will be immediately perceived. It is the same with qualities. This is the definition of saguna.

Nirguna means having no name, form or quality. In the bhakti texts, nirguna bhakti, in which a person needs no basis to connect with God, is considered the best. However, it is easier to practise saguna bhakti, as the mind needs a point of focus. To concentrate, you practise breath awareness, and at that time your mind focuses on the breathing process. Or you focus your mind at the eyebrow centre on a symbol, whether a flame, the sun, the moon. You focus your mind to stop its vacillation, to make it one-pointed, quiet and steady. Whatever point you focus your mind on, that is the representation of saguna. Saguna is the ladder to reach nirguna; apara is the staircase to reach para.

In saguna bhakti, you see the Supreme Reality in a definite form. At the beginning, the mind needs a form or name on which it can focus. If it is dark everywhere and you cannot see anything, in which direction will you go? If you see a light in the distance, you will aim for that light and walk on. You cannot see the path, you cannot see the road, yet the twinkling light in the distance becomes your goal and you walk in the dark towards it. Light indicates the direction in which you have to go. If there is no light, then what is the indication of where you should go? In this manner, saguna bhakti points you in the direction you need to walk. Upon reaching your destination, saguna bhakti changes to nirguna, and then the external worship becomes internal.

Once, a sadhu was travelling with his disciple. It was the sadhu's daily habit to bathe and worship the *shaligrama*, a black, oval-shaped stone representing Lord Vishnu. During their journey, they spent the night in the forest near a flowing river. The next morning at dawn, the sadhu said to his disciple, "Prepare the items for pooja while I bathe in the river." Saying this, he went away. The disciple got everything

ready for pooja and waited for the sadhu to return. The river was a bit far away and it was taking the sadhu some time. The disciple started to feel hungry. He looked all around to see if there were any fruit trees nearby. He spotted a blackberry tree. He picked up the shaligrama and started throwing it to bring the fruit down. Once he threw the shaligrama stone so hard that he did not know where it landed. Despite desperately looking for that cherished stone, he could not find it. The poor disciple started to become worried and frightened. He had been using the very same shaligrama to bring down the fruit which the sadhu worshipped every day, and now the shaligrama was lost! In the distance he could see the sadhu's ochre clothes. Quickly, he picked up a blackberry, cleaned it, respectfully put it in the place of the shaligrama and sat down quietly.

The sadhu came back and started the pooja. First he poured water, then sandalwood paste and then he completed the rest of the ritual. When he was cleaning the shaligrama, the berry in its place got squashed. The sadhu looked at the disciple and asked, "What has happened to the shaligrama?" The disciple replied: *Puni-puni chandana puni-puni pani; thakur sada gaye hama ka jani* – "Again and again sandalwood, again and again water; if the god melts away, what do I gather?"

Although this story is told as a joke, the underlying meaning is that if you establish a relationship with an inanimate object, after some time that inanimate object becomes conscious. According to quantum physics, the inanimate object will develop consciousness since you are transmitting energy to it. The transmission of your energy is filled with devotion and emotion, and this is what gives it power.

In saguna bhakti, it is essential for the mind to have a base upon which to focus. This base of focus will be name, form or quality. If name is the focus, then it is represented by mantra. If form is the focus, it is represented by an idol; and if it is quality, that base of focus will work as an inspiring energy to transform and uplift life. Thus, saguna bhakti begins with name, form and quality.

Steps to Bhakti

6 July 2009, Morning

Six divisions of bhakti

Paramguru Swami Sivananda says that bhakti can be classified in six ways. The first classification is saguna and nirguna bhakti. In saguna bhakti, the devotee or aspirant is involved in ritual: ringing bells, offering flowers, waving lights and incense, lighting a lamp, and making food offerings. Nevertheless, the heart and emotions remain narrow, constricted and restricted as the devotee likes his Beloved and no one else. The devotee does not even like those who do not share the same beliefs.

In nirguna bhakti, the devotee experiences the divine in everything. Idol and prayer are not necessary, as the devotee is completely absorbed and infused with God and there is an incessant flow of love from the devotee towards God. Nirguna bhakti is seen in the lives of saints and is expressed in their behaviour. The flow of love in their lives is only towards God, the Supreme Spirit. Just as a river loses its identity when it merges with the ocean, in nirguna bhakti, all the expressions of the devotee's inner being become one with God. In every aspect of the consciousness: manas, buddhi, chitta and ahamkara, only God is experienced at all times. In para bhakti an aspirant does not try to attain some part of God's glory, only closeness and intimacy with God is desired.

Swami Sivananda says that the second division of bhakti is that of *vidhi*, ritual, versus ardent divine love. In ritualized

bhakti, a person focuses on observing the prescribed rules and religious conduct though there is love for the divine. The bhakti of ardent love is not bound by any rules or laws. Examples of such bhaktas are Mirabai and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. What bound Mirabai's bhakti? She was a princess, yet she was such a passionate bhakta that her mind was on the Lord every moment. She sang, *Mere to Giridhara Gopala dusaro na koyi* – "Nobody but the Lord is mine. He is everyone to me. The husband is not mine, the family is not mine, wealth is not mine: the Lord is all I have. He is my husband, he is my child, he is my happiness, he is my everything." In the bhakti of ardent love, *ragatmika bhakti*, there are no rules, laws, restrictions or boundaries of any kind. A deep, strong current of emotion flows constantly towards the Beloved.

The third division of bhakti is sakama and nishkama. The first is inspired by a desire or need, and the second by emotion and sentiment. *Sakama bhakti* is motivated by thoughts such as: 'I want wealth and glory, I want name and fame, I want success, I want a child.' Prayer to fulfil a desire is called sakama bhakti, whereas *nishkama bhakti* is selfless and free from self-gratifying wishes, cravings or desires.

The fourth division of bhakti is vyabhichara bhakti and avyabhichara bhakti. *Vyabhichara* means fluctuating, flirting, or searching for pleasure in many places. The attitude in vyabhichara bhakti is like that of a bee that flies from flower to flower in search of nectar: a little from this one, a little from that one. The mind does not stay constant on one ishta in this bhakti; it is drawn towards many. You think a certain devata or god will be stronger, another mantra will benefit you more, another pooja will bring you more grace, another guru will show you more mercy, another deity will give you more boons. Somebody tells you to chant a certain mantra as it will be auspicious for you so you accept that. Then a second person advises you to do another mantra, saying it will bring about your welfare, so you start to chant that one as well. In a few years, there is such a collection of mantras that there is



no time to chant them all. You chant the different mantras with different desires. This is vyabhichara bhakti.

Sri Swamiji says that if you want water from the ground then do not dig fifty holes each a foot deep. Dig one that is fifty feet deep and you will get water. It is also written in the scriptures: *Eko Brahma dwitiya nasti* – “God is only one; He is not two.” Due to your need, you see Him in many forms. That is your personal feeling, but in reality God is one.

Look at yourself: you are someone’s spouse, parent, sibling and child. You are related to each person in a different manner. You are only one person, yet you play many different roles. If a person can play so many varied roles then the Almighty God can also do so, and does. God is one, yet you give Him different names and forms to suit yourself. However, there should be only one Beloved, one ishta, as the goal. This is avyabhichara bhakti, the bhakti of fidelity.

There is always progress in bhakti. When Raja Uttanapada’s son, Dhruva, was praying to God, his bhakti was sakama. He was praying as his stepmother had forbidden him from sitting on his father’s lap. His own mother then said to him, “Your real father is God. Go sit on his lap.” Dhruva practised sakama

devotion to God with the desire to sit on his lap. After a period of time, sakama bhakti changed into nishkama. When God appeared before him, he forgot everything. He did not say, “Give me the opportunity to sit on your lap.” Upon seeing God he was dumbfounded; he could not say a word. God then put His conch to Dhruva’s lips and upon feeling that touch, Dhruva begged for everlasting bhakti. In response, God gave him a special status. As the star Dhruva in the night sky, or the Pole Star, he always remains fixed at one point.

Everyone’s bhakti is saguna at first; it is vyabhichara, apara and vidhi bhakti. In the course of time, as the emotions quieten and settle, the mind becomes clearer and desires reduce, bhakti changes to nirguna and nishkama.

The fifth division of bhakti is gauna and mukhya bhakti. The worship of spirits, elements and nature are all considered a part of *gauna*, or secondary, indirect bhakti, while worship of the formless Parabrahma is *mukhya*, or principal, foremost bhakti.

The sixth classification is tamasic, rajasic and sattwic bhakti. These are inspired by the predominance of a particular guna. For example, sattwic bhakti will cause the sattwa guna to predominate so the sadhaka will give up selfish and self-oriented desires, and think, feel and act in accordance with pure bhakti. The sadhaka moves from the negative, destructive, tamasic nature to the pure, luminous, harmonious nature of the divine.

Worship of the five gods

In every individual’s life, one element is predominant. Based on this element, one of the five main gods, the *pancha devata*, should be chosen for worship at the beginning. The five gods are Shakti, Ganesha, Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma.

The texts of bhakti say that one in whose life the earth element is predominant should worship Ganesha; one in whose life the water element is primary should worship Vishnu; one in whose life the fire element predominates should worship Brahma; one in whose life the wind element

predominates should worship Shakti; and one in whose life the space element predominates should worship Shiva.

Sadhana of bhakti

The *Srimad Bhagavatam* says:

*Shravanam kirtanam Vishnoh smaranam padasevanam
archanam vandanam dasyam sakhyam atmanivedanam.*

These are the nine ways of bhakti sadhana prescribed in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*. The first is *shravana*, listening to the stories of the Lord. The second is *kirtan*, singing of the qualities of the Lord. The third is *smarana*, remembering the name of the Lord. The fourth is *padasevana*, cultivating a feeling of universal oneness, through service at the feet of the Lord. The fifth is *archana*, surrendering all one's deeds to the Lord, through worship, ritual and reverence. The sixth is *vandana*, the humbling of one's ego, bowing one's head. The seventh is *dasya*, serving, seva. The eighth is *sakhya*, having the attitude of a friend, and the last is *atmanivedana*, surrendering oneself totally.

In the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, bhakti sadhana has been explained very simply with emphasis on three things: *darshan* or inner vision, *shravana* or hearing, and *chintan* or contemplation. Through *shravana*, *darshan* and *chintan* the mind becomes one with the Lord. No matter how misshapen a vessel, when you pour liquid into it, it takes on the shape of the vessel. As long as the liquid remains in the vessel it will retain the same shape and form. Similarly, when you hear the name of the Lord, when you contemplate the qualities of the Lord, when you bring to mind the form of the Lord, the mind takes on the same aspect as the Lord.

Shravana, *kirtan* and *smarana* come in the first category of bhakti, in which the name is important. In the second category are *padasevana*, *archana* and *vandana*, in which service, worship and prayer are important. In the third division are included *dasya*, *sakhya* and *atmanivedana*, which are expressions of one's faith in and relationship with the divine.

The *Srimad Bhagavatam* divides navadha bhakti into these three categories. It also states that if you practise shravana, your mind will become engrossed in the Lord. If you practise kirtan, your mind will remember His name and qualities. If you practise smarana, you will remember Him all the time just as you do your son; He will live in your mind and heart.

A mother lets her little child play around as she works in the kitchen. The child plays on the floor while she cuts vegetables, lights a fire, cleans the rice and dal, and does all her work. When she finds that the child has wandered to a place of possible danger, she immediately removes the child to a place of safety and then goes back to her work. Her constant awareness of the child is called smarana.

Sri Swamiji says, “I do not always remember Swami Sivananda. I do not keep repeating his name throughout the day; however, I feel his presence constantly. When I turn around I feel as if Swami Sivananda is standing there. When I walk I feel as if Swami Sivananda is walking beside me. Wherever I look I see only his form.” This is the full expression of faith in a disciple’s life:

*Jahan kahin dekha Prabhuji ki maya
Sabke dil me hai Prabhuji ki chhaya.*

Wherever I look, I see the play of God
In every heart resides the shadow of God.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna says (12:1–2): “Meditate on Me, do japa of my name; to focus your mind single-pointedly on Me is bhakti.” In this way, many different bhakti sadhanas, methods and disciplines are described in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, the *Ramacharitamanas*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the Puranas.

In the ‘Aranyakanda’ of the *Ramacharitamanas*, navadha bhakti, the nine methods of bhakti, as instructed by Lord Rama to Mata Shabari are described:

*Navadhaa bhagati kahahun tohi paaheen; saavadhaana sunu
dharu mana maaheen.*

Prathama bhagati santanha kara sangaa; doosari rati mama kathaa prasangaa.

Guru pada pankaja sevaa teesari bhagati amaana; chaauthi bhagati mama guna gana karai kapata taji gaana.

Mantra jaapa mama dridha bisvaasaa; panchama bhajana so beda prakaasaa.

Chhatha dama seela birati bahu karamaa; nirata nirantara sajjana dharamaa.

Saatavan sama mohi maya jaga dekhaa; moten santa adhika kari lekhaa.

Aathavan jathaalaabha santoshaa; sapanehun nahin dekhai paradoshaa.

Navama sarala saba sana chalaheenaa; mama bharosa hiyan harasha na deenaa.

Sri Rama's first instruction to Mata Shabari is: *Prathama bhagati santanha kara sanga* – "The company of saintly people is the first kind of bhakti." Who are saintly people? *Santa hridaya navanita samana* – "Those whose hearts are as tender as freshly churned butter." One whose heart is hard as stone is not a saintly person. One who lacks a sensitive heart, who does not care about anyone and instead troubles others, cannot be a saintly person. A hard-hearted person can never be of any use to anyone, for such a person always remains engrossed in self-centred activities.

Only a tender-hearted person whose pranas have become soft is called a satpurusha, a good person. A sadhu's heart should be as soft as butter. One who is soft and tender is full of sattwic qualities. The stream of love, compassion, trust and faith has started flowing in his life. Such a person never says a harsh word to anyone, does not think ill of anyone, does not wish ill to anyone, and does not waste time in praise and criticism. Such a person always remains peaceful and follows the path of truth. One who walks the path of truth is called a bhakti sadhaka.

The first sadhana of bhakti is to walk the path of truth. It is through the company of truth that one imbibes truth in

life. However, nothing happens merely by spending time with saints and sages and hearing their wisdom if one does not imbibe and practise that wisdom in one's life. It is essential to internalize the teachings. Only then is the first sadhana of bhakti realized and actualized.

Dusari rati mama katha prasanga. This is the second sadhana of navadha bhakti: listening to the stories of the Lord. The narrations in texts such as the *Srimad Bhagavatam* are not just stories; they are teachings that are useful in life. Every story in the *Srimad Bhagavatam* has teachings of wisdom, justice, dharma, law, truth, beauty and virtue. When you listen to the stories, imbibe the teachings. People usually listen to stories for entertainment; they do not contemplate on how they can adopt the lessons inherent in the stories in their lives. 'How can I become more patient? How can I enhance my faith? How can I improve my restraint?' When you internalize these things to the extent that they become a part of your inner being, then the second sadhana of bhakti will manifest in your life.

In India during the sixties and the seventies, if a boy was seen with an English novel he was considered to be educated and with a modern bent of mind, and if someone was seen carrying the *Bhagavad Gita* or the *Ramayana*, he was called old-fashioned. Such a state of society negates the second method of bhakti: *Rati mama katha prasanga*. Your mind will become tamasic by reading novels. What teaching will you receive from a novel? What kind of samskaras will you imbibe? When you read the scriptures or other literature containing truth and wisdom, those teachings and samskaras will uplift and improve your life.

The third sadhana is: *Guru pada pankaja seva*. Generally people interpret this to mean to serve at the guru's feet. This is a dangerous interpretation. Once there was a guru who had two disciples. One afternoon, while the guru was resting, the disciples came to his kutir. Each disciple took one of the guru's legs and said, "This leg is mine, the other one is yours. You don't touch my leg and I will not touch



yours.” Both disciples started to massage the guru’s legs. By mistake one of them touched the guru’s other leg. The second disciple was furious: “How dare you touch my leg?” In retaliation, he touched the other leg. The first disciple was now annoyed that this fellow had touched the leg that was his share. He slapped the guru’s other leg. The second disciple gave two slaps back. Now the guru was caught between the two disciples and his legs were being repeatedly slapped, while the disciples were fighting among themselves.

This is not the way to serve the guru. *Guru pada pankaja seva tisari bhagati amana* means something else altogether. Follow the path shown by the guru with a humble heart, filled with the faith that you will benefit by walking this path.

Infused with faith and trust, give up arrogance, and keep developing and progressing according to the instructions of the guru. This is the third kind of bhakti.

Chauthi bhagati mama guna gana karai kapata taji gana. Fourth, without deceit or expectation, without self-centredness, remember always the divine names of the Lord, sing them, sing kirtan. People memorize film songs easily and sing them happily, yet if asked to sing the names of the Lord they become agitated and say, “Oh no, I can’t do that sort of a thing.” They start talking in terms of secularism and religiosity. A film song is considered secular and the name of God is considered non-secular. A philosophy or a way of thinking may be seen from the point of view of secularism and non-secularism; however, these are not the subjects of discussion here. We are simply talking about the individual’s relationship with the divine.

*Ishwara Allah Wahe Guru, chahe kaho Sri Rama,
Malika sabaka eka hai, alaga-alaga hai nama.*

Call him Ishwara, Allah, Wahe Guru or Sri Rama, There is only one Lord of all beings, different merely are the names.

This is the experience here. Leave guile and deception and let the mind flow in the contemplation, remembrance and kirtan of the Lord.

Mantra japa mama dridha biswasa, panchama bhajana so beda prakasa. The fifth sadhana is the japa of mantra and the teachings of the scriptures. Yoga says that mantra is a force that can free the mind from the bindings of desire and craving, and make it peaceful. *Mananat trayate iti mantrah* – “Mantra is that energy which liberates the mind from bondage.” The bondage of the mind is desire and craving. What you think, what you want and crave, what you wish to attain, is the bondage of the mind. If you want something, first you begin to think about it and slowly the thinking changes to worry. When the mind is caught up in worry and

anxiety, inner clarity is lost, as worry ties the mind to one subject, one thing, one line of thought. It does not allow the mind to be free. Mantra liberates the mind. If you can do japa with a worry-free, peaceful mind, that is a state of bhakti.

Chhatha dama seela birati bahu karama, nirata niranantara sajjana dharama. The sixth sadhana of bhakti is constant effort at endurance, goodness, *vairagya* or non-attachment, and graciousness. Here the main attribute is *sajjanata*, decency, goodness, humanness or graciousness. There are two principles in human beings: bruteness and humanness. More often, it is the animalistic nature that manifests in the form of lust, anger, hostility, aversion, greed, arrogance and envy. However, when humanness manifests in life, there is gentleness and softness. The sign of refinement is not being learned; it is non-aggression. The sign of decency is not volatility but peacefulness. Therefore, adopt and uphold the code of decency, humanness and goodness; cultivate a character that can help you progress in life from the negative, destructive ego of *tamas* to the luminosity, balance, peace and purity of *sattwa*.

Satarvan sama mohi maya jaga dekha, moten santa adhika kari lekha. Seventh, one must realize the omnipresence of God. One should experience God in everyone and the ego should not interfere in this experience of God. The ego is very difficult to overcome and destroy. Attainments make it bigger, causing a downfall of the aspirant. That is why one who simply tries to see the presence of God in everyone is called a *bhakta*.

Athavan jathalabha santosha, sapanehun nahin dekhai paradosha. The eighth sadhana of bhakti instructs one to be content and to refrain from finding fault. *Santosha* means to experience satisfaction and contentment in life. Accept what you have as *prasad* or God's gift and do not hanker after what you do not have. Do not see the shortcomings. When you see the whole world as a manifestation of the Supreme Spirit, how can you see fault in it? There will be a shortcoming only where there is no God. The verse first says, "See only my form everywhere", and then it says, "Do not see the shortcomings." This reflects the beautiful quality of the psychology of bhakti.

Navama sarala saba sana chhalahina, mama bharosa hiyan harasha na dina – “The ninth sadhana of bhakti is to be free of cunning, to be simple, to trust in God and avoid extreme high or low spirits.” This is the last sadhana of navadha bhakti. To say it in two words, this is *Ishwara pranidhana*, cultivation of trust in the supreme, non-decaying reality and dedication of one’s will and action to that. In the state of Ishwara pranidhana, there is complete trust and faith, as this trust is not dependent on some external object; it is dependent on one’s own self. After experiencing the Godhood in creation, after experiencing the element of God within oneself, only trust remains. This is the last stage of bhakti where one is overflowing with trust. When you have jumped into the ocean and become totally drenched, there is no fear of getting wet.

Fine-tune your nature

Bhakti can be attained through the right conditions in life, rather than through structured sadhana. By cultivating discipline and order in your life, bhakti develops. The effort in bhakti is to be alert and aware of your character and behaviour, and develop excellence in thought, feeling and action by nurturing the sattwic, creative, positive nature. Bhakti will be realized when the attempt is made to eradicate the negativity, cunning and deception from your life and your mind. If your mind and emotions can be fine-tuned, then there is no need to sit with your eyes closed in front of a statue of God. If you can make your mind and heart sensitive and connect them to the positive, uplifting, creative qualities and traits, then that is bhakti.

The scriptures say: *Shraddhaya satyamapyate* – “Truth can be attained through faith.” In other words, bhakti can be attained through faith. It is said in the *Rig Veda*: *Shraddhe shraddhapayeha nah* – “Mother Shraddha! Make my heart your abode.” According to the *Rig Veda*, one should first invoke *shraddha* or faith, then practise satsang. *Satsang* means keeping the company of a person who is generous, pure, without fault, discriminating, thoughtful and wise. If an

ordinary piece of wood is kept with a piece of sandalwood, after a period of time the ordinary piece of wood will take on the fragrance of sandalwood. This is the effect of keeping good company. Remove your impurities through satsang.

The *Rig Veda* further states that there should not be any ill-will towards anybody. The *Shukla Yajur Veda* says: *Mitrasyaham chakshusha sarvani bhootani samikshe* – “I am benevolent, looking at all creatures with a loving gaze. There is no trace of hostility or ill-will towards anyone. My sight is benevolent and loving towards all.” This is the mental and psychological attitude of goodwill.

To do good to all beings according to one’s capacity is bhakti. The *Atharva Veda* says: *Shatahasta samahara, sahastrahasta sankira* – “Gather wealth and gold with the enthusiasm and effort of a hundred hands and distribute with a thousand hands.” Take with a hundred hands and give with a thousand hands is the rule of bhakti. Without generosity and a giving, charitable nature, you cannot perfect bhakti. People have been ringing bells and doing japa for a thousand years, yet has anyone actually experienced bhakti? People confine their bhakti to the four walls of the temple; they do not practise it as a lifestyle, as a condition of their life. When bhakti becomes a lifestyle, the behaviour and interactions are full of bhakti. It is only when all interactions are full of bhakti that one is uplifted.

The *Rig Veda* says: *Madhvirgavo bhavantu nah* – “There should always be restraint in life. May no unbalanced, indiscriminating act happen through me. May there always be restraint in life.” The yoga texts say that in order to practise restraint, there must be awareness; you must meditate, become a witness of your thoughts and the master and director of your actions.

Six obstacles

The *Atharva Veda* says that to realize bhakti, you have to eliminate six obstacles from your nature and life. The first obstacle is attachment. Swami Sivananda says that attachment is like the owl that cannot see by day and can only see by

night. Attachment is like that photophobic owl; under the influence of attachment you are blind to dharma and justice. Therefore, first be victorious over attachment.

The second obstacle or fault is anger. Swami Sivananda says that anger is like a wolf, always ready to bite and eat up everyone. A wolf is a wild beast and so is anger. What discrimination is there in anger? There is no discrimination in anger and it eats up the goodness in your life. There are some, however, who change this wild nature.

There are two aspects of anger: one is that which cuts through one's bondage, removes the faults, dissolves the karmas and provides liberation, and the second takes one towards a downfall. Should the first aspect be considered as anger? If the guru becomes angry with you, the reason is not hostility or dislike; rather, it is the desire to free you of your shortcomings and weaknesses. When an ordinary person gets angry he becomes so overcome by the anger that all balance is lost. This kind of anger is considered wolfish, over which you need to be victorious.

The third obstacle that must be overcome for bhakti to flourish in one's life is jealousy, the nature of which is like a dog. It must be held by a leash, kept under control. The fourth is lust, which is like *chakva-chakvi*, a species of geese. The scriptures say you must triumph over lust. Fifth, conquer the arrogance which behaves like *garuda*, the haughty eagle. Lastly, through proper methods destroy the greed that is like the vulture.

Attachment, anger, jealousy, desire, arrogance and greed: when these six defects are rectified, bhakti will arise spontaneously. These are the obstacles on the path of bhakti.

Prapatti: complete surrender

There is only one way to realize bhakti and that is *prapatti*, *sharanagati* or samarpan, complete surrender. The intense emotion, the strong restlessness and urge to give oneself over to God is called prapatti. In prapatti, in sharanagati, in *samarpan*, the devotee has no thought other than that of the divine.

Once, Emperor Akbar was hunting in the woods. When it was time for namaz, he spread out his prayer mat and settled down for worship. While the emperor was offering namaz, a young tribal girl came walking through the trees and passed by, walking upon his prayer mat. Emperor Akbar continued doing namaz; however, upon finishing he ordered his soldiers to catch the girl. The soldiers brought the girl before the emperor.

Emperor Akbar asked, “Are you blind? Didn’t you see where you were walking? I was offering namaz and you walked across my mat. Didn’t you see the prayer mat?” In a voice trembling with fear the girl said, “Maharaja, please forgive me, I made a mistake. I will never again commit such a blunder.” The emperor asked, “What were you thinking of at the time?” The girl replied, “Maharaja, do not be angry if I tell the truth. I was thinking of my lover, as I was going to meet him. I didn’t know where my steps were falling. My sight was filled with only the picture of my lover. My heart was filled with restlessness to meet him. You too were offering love to your Beloved; however, your eyes were everywhere, whereas mine were only on my lover, and that is why I committed such a mistake.”

When the emperor heard this, his eyes opened. He said, “Give this girl money and set her free. She has told me how one should be attached to one’s Beloved.” A person should be completely absorbed in bhakti. If one can be as absorbed in the love of God as one is in worldly passion then *moksha* or liberation can be attained.

Prapatti has two aspects: one is sharanagati, taking refuge, and the other is samarpan, self-surrender. The devotee may have control over the personal practice of bhakti; however, acquiring prapatti is controlled by God. It will happen only when He so desires. Yet, if you are ready then it will not take long. When you go for a job interview, you take all your degrees and certificates with you. The interviewer first looks at all your papers, and then he talks to you. If you go without any papers, unprepared, then the



interviewer will tell you to go away and return only when you have all the documents.

To walk the path of bhakti is every person's own decision and dharma. If in the process of bhakti you do not try to remove the six obstructions and do not try to attain prapatti, sharanagati and samarpan, then bhakti is of no use. If you eat, it is to fill the stomach. If you drink water, it is to quench your thirst. Similarly, if you practise bhakti, the aim is to take refuge in and surrender yourself to God.

Bhakti begins by focusing on the divine. It begins when attainment of the divine becomes the goal. However, you have to prepare yourself to reach the state of sharanagati and samarpan. When you can remove the defects of life, God Himself will grace you with prapatti. The one thus graced thinks, 'I belong to God, therefore God Himself will look after me.' Practising bhakti is in the hands of the bhakta; however, to attain prapatti, to achieve the state of sharanagati and samarpan remains in the hands of God. That is why there should only be one sentiment in a bhakta's heart:

*Aba to dee hai nayiyaa nadi men bahaa, jaa lagee jisa kinaare
chale jaayenge;*

*Aba to karunaa kee jaba bhee chalegee havaa, jaa lagee jisa
kinaare chale jayenge.*

Now that I have floated my boat in the river, whichever
bank it reaches there I will go;

Now whenever the wind of compassion blows, wherever
it puts me down there I will flow.



Applied Bhakti Sadhana

6 July 2009, Afternoon

The essence of bhakti yoga is complete surrender, complete emptying of the self. Radha once asked Sri Krishna, “Why do you love your flute so much? You always keep it with you; it is always at your lips. Why is it the flute is so dear to you?” Sri Krishna replied, “The flute is so dear to me because it is empty within. Whatever note I wish to play, I can produce it through this empty flute.”

To empty oneself of desires, ego and selfishness and to free oneself from negative, destructive, detrimental actions should be the effort of an aspirant on the path of bhakti. Bhakti yoga is not ritual and worship; bhakti yoga is the process of purifying, transforming and channelling one’s emotions towards the divine through the techniques and methods of bhakti yoga.

Bhakti sadhana in the *Ramacharitamanas*

The bhakti texts offer many methods to attain the state of bhakti. The methods that Sri Rama gave to Mata Shabari to achieve the fruit of bhakti in her life are easy and practical. Sri Rama says that first of all, pay attention to the company you keep. If the company you keep is good then your mind and thoughts will be good. Remain infused with good thoughts so that no negativity is born towards another, the love of God and attraction to God remains constant. Give up your ego and imbibe the teachings of the guru;

internalize them. Practise mantra japa. Connect your mind to your Beloved, your *ishta devata*, your chosen form of the transcendental power.

The teaching of navadha bhakti is relevant to everyday life. If an ordinary piece of wood is kept with a piece of sandalwood for some time, the ordinary wood will also become fragrant. This is the result of company. If there are good people and good thoughts all around you, then your thinking, behaviour and interactions will also be good, and that will become the expression of your life. If you live in a negative environment full of petty thoughts, then your whole life will become petty and narrow. This is why it is said that one should keep the company of good people. One who is filled with *sattwa guna* or pure, noble qualities is called a *satpurusha*, a good person. It is not necessary for such a person to be a guru, or wise or liberated; he can be an ordinary person. The only requirement is to connect with the sattvic expressions in life and not with the rajasic or the tamasic expressions. Bringing about a change in behaviour and conduct is an aspect of bhakti that Sri Rama has spoken about.

Bhakti sadhana in the *Bhagavad Gita*

When referring to bhakti sadhana, Sri Krishna says that in order to focus your emotions, connect your mind to your breath and concentrate on *Om*. Breathe in, breathe out, and meditate on *Om*. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna offers a number of methods for focusing the emotions. He talks about japa yoga as a method whereby the mind can be made one with the Beloved or ishta. Sri Krishna's technique of mantra japa is a sadhana. The first step is to sit down and calm all the physical senses. Sit in solitude at a place where the external environment will not agitate, disturb or distract the senses. Next, bring the mind to a point of focus at the nose tip or the eyebrow centre. Practise either nose tip gazing or eyebrow centre focus. Keeping the attention focused on the nose tip or the eyebrow centre, become aware of the breath, and repeat

the mantra in time with the breath. This method given by Sri Krishna is meditation with japa.

The second method involves mantra repetition throughout the day, spontaneously, easily, while moving about: eating, walking, strolling or running. The Gayatri, Omkara, *So-ham* or the Mahamantra can be chanted. The first technique is japa with meditation or concentration wherein one has to still the senses and the mind, focus the mind on the symbol of the ishta and do japa of the mantra. This second technique is japa without meditation, which is easier. These are the two practices that Sri Krishna has given. The methods of bhakti in the *Bhagavad Gita* are based on the science of yoga. Sri Krishna spoke of the techniques of sadhana and the signs of a *bhakta*, devotee. He has not specifically referred to shravana, manana, kirtan or bhajan; however, he has accepted all of them. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna was asked (12:1):

*Evam satatayuktaa ye bhaktaastvaam paryupaasate;
Ye chaapyaksharamavyaktam tessaam ke yogavittamaah.*

Who may be considered the greater devotee, the one who worships your *sakara* or manifest aspect or the one who worships your *nirakara* or unmanifest aspect?

In reply to this question, Sri Krishna says, “Both are equal and both methods will lead to the attainment of God. Whether you walk the sakara path or the path of the nirakara, you will still come to Me. Whether you take the shortcut or the longer route, your goal remains the same.” However, the one who seeks this goal needs to have some merit and high qualities. These qualities are referred to in the twelfth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Sri Krishna has accepted every kind of worship, whether idol worship or singing bhajans and kirtans. He says, whatever your chosen method, continue with it. At the same time, practise japa, whether with meditation or without meditation. Do japa of Omkara, Gayatri, the Mahamantra or the mantra given to you by your guru.



Japa is like a peg for the mind. Sri Swamiji tells a story. Once, a caravan of camels was travelling in the desert. It was evening and the caravan halted. Everyone got busy pitching tents, tying up the camels and preparing for the night. After tying the camels it was discovered that one camel was left out, as his ropes and peg were lost. They wondered what to do, for if the camel was not tied up, it would run away during the night. A wise old man in the caravan was consulted. He said, "It doesn't matter if you do not have a rope; simply go near the camel and act as if you are tying him up." One man went to the camel and pretended to tether him; he pretended to pull at the rope to make him sit down, pretended to dig a hole to affix the peg and tie the rope to it. The camel sat down quietly.

The next morning the caravan prepared to move. The tents were dismantled, the camels were loaded; however, one camel did not get up. No matter how much he was beaten with sticks, he would not get up. Then the old man came and

asked, “Have you untied the camel? Just as you pretended to tie him up, you must also pretend to untie him.” As soon as the act of pretending to untie him was completed, the camel promptly stood up. It is the same with mantra and the mind. The mind needs a peg to tie itself to, and that peg is the mantra.

There are three ways of practising mantra. The best way is *manasika*, or mental repetition. It creates the *tadakara vritti*, the tendency of the mind to become one with whatever is presented to it. If, while doing this practice, the mind becomes introverted to the point of sleepiness, begin to whisper the mantra to once again link your awareness to it. Move your lips, whisper the mantra and become aware of it once again. If you are still drowsy, begin to say the mantra aloud. These are the three ways of mantra japa: *manasika*, saying it mentally; *upanshu*, whispering it; and *vaikhari*, saying it aloud.

Sri Krishna also teaches *pratyahara*, withdrawal of the senses. Just as a turtle withdraws its limbs into its shell, one should gather one’s senses. The turtle has two legs, two hands, one tail and one head outside the shell, which he withdraws in. The *Bhagavad Gita* says a human being has six senses (15:7:2): *Manah shashthani indriyani prakritisthani karshati*. There are five senses and the mind, which is defined as the sixth sense. Like the limbs of the turtle, these senses are outside the shell. The shell covers the *atma*, the soul. From within the shell, the five senses and the mind have emerged. Upon withdrawing these, you are withdrawn into yourself. While you are interacting with the world, the senses are extroverted and will remain extroverted. When you close your eyes and begin contemplation of the Divine, your senses will introvert. This is *pratyahara*, withdrawal of the senses and the extroverted expressions and nature.

Methods of bhakti

In the sadhana aspect of bhakti yoga, Sri Krishna taught *pratyahara* and *japa yoga*. Sri Rama’s teaching is the practical

method of change and transformation in one's life. In the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, nine precepts are given: shravanam kirtanam Vishnosmaranam padasevanam archanam vandanam dasyam sakhyam atmanivedanam. Out of these, shravana, kirtan and smarana belong to one category, padasevana, archana and vandana belong to the second category, and dasya, sakhya and atmanivedana belong to the third category. *Shraddha* or faith is developed and expanded through *dasya bhava*, the attitude of service, *sakhya bhava*, the attitude of friendship, and *atmanivedana*, self-surrender. When this is achieved, the relationship with one's Beloved becomes pure.

Many practise the ritualistic aspect of bhakti. They make an altar or a small temple in the house. An idol or a picture of their ishta is placed there, and they worship it daily, offering flowers and incense. That is also a discipline. When you follow a ritual, your mind becomes happy and peaceful. If there are any worries, the mind finds consolation in the fact that the problem has been brought to God's notice. This kind of worship is the result of a natural inner urge to connect with a higher power.

Swami Sivananda's ashtanga yoga

In the lives of saints, a different kind of bhakti is seen. For them the meaning of bhakti is not prayer, but *seva* and *prem*, service and love. Swami Sivananda's ashtanga yoga begins with *seva*. The first limb is serve, the second is love and the third is give; take with a hundred hands and give with a thousand hands. When you are able to do this, then your emotions become pure. The fourth limb is inner purity, the fifth is to be filled with virtues, the sixth is to have positive expression, the seventh is to centre the mind on God, and the eighth is to realize the presence of God in your life. These eight steps are all part of bhakti.

Sri Swamiji says that the culmination of all yogas is Sivananda yoga. Practise hatha yoga, raja yoga, kundalini yoga, kriya yoga, dhyana yoga, mantra yoga. Practise as

many yogas as there are. Ultimately, though, you have to take refuge in the path of bhakti. Sri Swamiji says, “I have studied much and searched a lot; however, I experienced fulfilment and completion only when I followed the path of bhakti.”

Awakening atmabhava

Feeling for all creatures as one feels for oneself, *atmabhava*, is the foundation of bhakti. Sri Swamiji says, “Awaken this feeling of cosmic unity.” Until you become sensitive towards all beings, you are not going to be able to achieve anything. You wish to uplift society, yet you are not sensitive. You are sensitive only towards your own pocket; you might have a hundred dollars in your pocket, but you do not want to part with a cent. There is no sign of generosity in you.

It is not difficult to achieve atmabhava. It develops through following your duty, through love, generosity and through experiencing the presence of the divine. If something is misplaced in your house, you cannot disown the responsibility for it. In your house you are as responsible as your parents, grandparents or siblings. You cannot say someone else is responsible in your home. No matter how many people live in the house, if something happens it becomes the responsibility of every person living there. This is due to atmabhava, empathy, a feeling of oneness. The moment you step outside the home your responsibility is over. If anything is moved or misplaced outside of your own home it does not matter to you; there is no feeling of oneness in your mind.

Your world and your relationships are limited only to the idea of ‘me and my family’, and nothing beyond that. This is your world. You are not concerned with the people beyond this boundary; you feel no relationship with them, they are all considered strangers. This tendency to remain connected with ‘me and mine’ is the selfish tendency. End this selfishness and establish a connection with other people. When you cultivate a connection with other people, your self-centred, self-oriented tendency will diminish on its own.

Sri Swamiji says, “When you go to the market to buy shoes for your two children, buy three pairs. Two for your own children and the third for an unknown child. When you buy clothes, buy three sets; two for your children and the third for a child you do not even know.” Awaken the feeling of oneness towards a stranger, and your consciousness and emotions will expand and the selfish tendency will spontaneously reduce.

Every person wishes for love and respect in their life, whether they are poor or prosperous, high or low, young or old. If you can give love and respect to someone who is in need, then they will not feel the lack in their life. Regardless of whether the person has a grain of food to eat in the house or not, they will not feel the shadow of scarcity if there is love and respect. When you give a person love and respect, remember that you are giving love and respect to the God residing within that person.

If you believe that God resides within everyone, that He is omnipotent, then it becomes your duty to please God, to keep Him happy. When you see a thirsty person, remember that it is God residing within that person who is thirsty. When you see a hungry person, it is God residing within that person who is hungry. It is not only the stomach that feels the hunger; the experience is also felt in the *atma*, the spirit. If a person is unhappy, God within that person is also unhappy. God is a reflection of human feeling and emotion and every individual is a reflection of God’s emotion.

This is the key to spiritual life and the secret of life. This is the truth of life. If you can see that divine spark within others and help to remove the lack in their lives so they may grow and develop to experience peace, plenty and prosperity in their lives, then this is the highest form of bhakti. This is seva, this is love and this is atmabhava.

The subject of bhakti is vast and the tradition of bhakti in India is very rich. Adi Shankaracharya had his own kind of bhakti; Ramanujacharya had his own kind of bhakti; Vallabhacharya, Madhavacharya, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Gyandev each had their own kind of bhakti and they have



all presented their views and thoughts on the philosophy of bhakti. Here, only an introduction to bhakti has been given, in which five paradigms of bhakti have been described: the bhakti teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Ramayana*, the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, and those of Swami Sivananda and Swami Satyananda.

The jnani and the bhakta

What is the difference between an intellectual and a devotee? The intellectual swims hard to get to the other shore of the river, whereas the devotee sits in a boat and has faith that the ferryman will take him across. The intellectual is independent-minded and thinks, ‘On the strength of my talent and knowledge I will gain everything.’ The devotee has surrendered and says, “What strength or talent have I? Whatever God wants to make me do, let it be done.”

An intellectual never asks anyone for anything, not even God. The devotee is always opening the heart and

appealing to God. The jnani thinks, ‘What good does it do me to make an appeal?’ and the devotee thinks ‘If I do not ask God, whom can I ask?’ On the strength of his discipline or sadhana, through his own will, a jnani makes the effort to attain *siddhis*, psychic powers, and material wealth, whereas the devotee considers all wealth, glories and *siddhis* to be contemptible compared to the Lord’s grace. His attention does not go to wealth or glory; it remains constantly focused on, ‘How can I acquire the grace of my Beloved? That is all I need in my life.’ You have to make your decision: either become a jnani, or become a bhakta.

Hari Om Tat Sat



Swami Niranjanananda was born in Rajnandgaon (Chhattisgarh) in 1960. Guided from birth by his guru, Swami Satyananda Saraswati, he came to live at the Bihar School of Yoga in Munger at the age of four where he received training in yogic and spiritual sciences through yoga nidra. In 1971 he was initiated into Dashnami sannyasa, and for twelve years he lived overseas, acquiring an understanding of different cultures and helping further his guru's mission to spread yoga 'from door to door and shore to shore'.



He returned to India in 1983 to guide the activities of Bihar School of Yoga, Sivananda Math and Yoga Research Foundation at Ganga Darshan. In 1990 he was initiated as a paramahansa sannyasin and in 1993 anointed spiritual preceptor in succession to Swami Satyananda Saraswati. He established Bihar Yoga Bharati, the first university of yoga, in 1994, Yoga Publications Trust in 2000, and a children's yoga movement, Bal Yoga Mitra Mandal, in 1995. He travelled extensively to guide seekers around the world until 2009, when he received the command to commence a new phase of sannyasa life.

In 2010, he established Sannyasa Peeth, to enable seekers to experience the spiritual and cultural traditions of India in their essence. The year marked his entry into a phase of higher sadhana and tirtha yatra.

In 2013, he conducted the World Yoga Convention in Munger to celebrate the golden jubilee of the Bihar School of Yoga, and launched a new era of yogic renaissance. In 2013 he also commenced the arduous panchagni sadhana. In 2014, he embarked on a Bharat Yatra, an all-India tour, transmitting the gift of yoga to all. Since then, Swami Niranjan has been working to develop the next stage of yogic training and teaching, and has initiated several programs to help people deepen their experience of yoga and imbibe the traditional wisdom. Simultaneously, he has revived various ancient knowledge systems and practices of India.

In 2017, he received the Padma Bhushan, the third highest civilian award given by the Government of India, for the outstanding work in the field of yoga.

Author of many classic books on yoga and other spiritual streams, Swami Niranjan is a magnetic source of wisdom on all aspects of yogic philosophy, practice and lifestyle. He ably combines tradition with modernity as he continues to work for his guru's mission.



SATYANANDA YOGA
BIHAR YOGA

“By cultivating discipline and order in your life, bhakti develops. The effort in bhakti is to be alert and aware of your character and behaviour, and develop excellence in thought, feeling and action by nurturing the sattwic, creative, positive nature. Bhakti will be realized when the attempt is made to eradicate the negativity, cunning and deception from your life and your mind. If your mind and emotions can be fine-tuned, then there is no need to sit with your eyes closed in front of a statue of God. If you can make your mind and heart sensitive and connect them to the positive, uplifting, creative qualities and traits, then that is bhakti.”

On the occasion of Guru Poornima in 2009, Swami Niranjanananda gave a series of satsangs from 4th to 6th July, on the theme of bhakti. In his discourses, Swamiji presented the classical definitions as well as practical sadhanas to follow this path of spiritual progress. The satsangs reach right into the heart of the aspirant and make him see the world from a new perspective, full of softness and contentment. The book is an invaluable gift for all those who have had a glimpse of bhakti, the way of channelling emotions and positive living.

